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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPT., 1976
VOL. 39, NO. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

A CLIMATE FOR MURDER

Thomas Wayne Cross was a penny-ante punk. Not even his sister regretted his murder. Shayne found his body by accident or he would never have become involved in the slayings that followed—involved at first without even a client to foot the expenses. And when he did collect one, he found himself in the employ of a prime suspect.

..... 2 to 58

AN EXCITING NEW NOVELET
THE WRONG DOOR
DAVE BISCHOFF ..... 66 to 85

FIVE THRILLING NEW STORIES
BANNERMAN COLLECTION
EDWARD WELLEN 59
PAINTED IN CRIMSON
PAULINE C. SMITH 86
BLIND MAN'S BLUFF
JOHN F. DOBBYN 100
IN THE SOUP
JAMES HOLDING 108
THE SQUARE ROOT OF DEAD
MICHAEL KURLAND & RICHARD LUPOFF 114

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SAM MERWIN, JR. Editor

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 39, No. 3, Sept., 1976. Published monthly by Renown Publications, Inc., 8230 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90048. Subscriptions, One Year (12 issues) $9.00; Two Years (24 issues) $18.00; single copies 75¢. Second-class postage paid at Los Angeles, Cal., and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious.

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Postmaster—return P.O. Box 69150, Los Angeles, California 90069.

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A CLIMATE FOR MURDER

The redhead's only possible client is shot dead before they can make a deal. But not even lack of a fee can keep Shayne out of Miami's most baffling mystery.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

CLOYING FOG SHROUDED Miami Beach when Mike Shayne and Lucy Hamilton left the supper club around nine o'clock that warm Friday evening. Shayne tucked his secretary's elbow inside a strong hand as he guided her toward the Buick in the parking lot beside the squat building.

They moved down a wide drive area flanked by the back ends of tightly parked cars. The Buick was deep inside the lot. The sound of their footsteps seemed magnified, the quick clicks of Lucy's clog heels almost a rattle compared to the solid smack of the private detective's long strides.

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Featuring

MIKE SHAYNE

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Shayne turned Lucy into a row of cars and put her inside the Buick. Her sigh was audible and his grin was wide as he stood tall and camouflaged in the whispy wetness. He had felt her momentary hesitation and he knew she had made a swift inventory of the Buick's interior before folding inside.

He couldn't resist saying, "Did you expect to find a corpse, Angel?" he chortled.

"It's eerie tonight, Michael," she replied.

Expertly he maneuvered the powerful sedan out of the slot and out to the street. Even with the headlights on bright, they were unable to penetrate the thick fog. Shayne sat hunched well forward, his keen eyes searching the swirling clumps of grayness. It was the kind of fog from which a dark form—another car, a walking man or woman—could loom instantly.

On the street, he picked up a pair of red taillights ahead and settled back in the seat. He remained a comfortable distance behind the taillights, let the other guy do the driving. They took him to Collins Avenue, the main vein through Miami Beach.

He turned onto Collins, easing the Buick into a creeping line of traffic. "How about stopping at the Side Door?" he suggested.

He shot a glance at Lucy. She was turned toward him. Shadows and dashlight distorted her smooth-skinned face but failed to mask the smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Sure," she said. "Curious?"

Curiosity made him tick. It was one of the main reasons he had long ago dug in his heels and become a private detective. Investigation made his heart beat rhythmically, his blood flow smoothly, his nerve system tingle. He was a total, comfortable man when he was investigating. Investigation was where he lived the hardest.

The Side Door was a new and popular lounge in Miami Beach. He might want to use it someday, or he might be summoned there for a meeting. Familiarity with the physical layout could be a bonus.

When they walked out of the club an hour later, he was satisfied. The bar stockpile had been adequate, the prices right, the table service quick and efficient. The interior of the club was a bit too cave-like, too dark, for his tastes, but most of the place could be surveyed from any one of the tables and there was a manned rear exit down a carpeted corridor from the rest rooms.

Shayne stopped short on the sidewalk and grunted. Upon

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their arrival at the Side Door there had been adequate parking space at the curb and he had maneuvered the Buick into an area between two smaller cars, leaving ample room front and rear. But now, as he peered through the fog, he saw that the smaller cars had been replaced, the gaps no longer existed. The Buick was jammed between a dark sedan at the rear and an ancient and dented Volkswagen van up front.

Shayne put Lucy in the front seat of the Buick, then went back to the dark sedan. There was an inch of space between the sedan and Buick bumpers, but a good three feet of empty area behind the sedan. He tried a sedan door. It was locked. He went up front. The curtained rear of the van was pressed against the Buick. Ahead of the van was an empty parking slot.

Muttering an oath against the inconsideration of other drivers, he went around the front of the van to the driver's side and reached for the door. If the van had been left unlocked he could slip it out of gear and use the power of the Buick to push himself free.

The smell filled his nostrils the instant he opened the van door and he froze. Death had an esoteric odor.

He stood rooted for a few seconds, glancing up and down the street. Traffic crawled. Dulled headlights came out of the fog to creep past behind him.

He moved in tight against the van, bracing the door against his shoulder as he inventoried the shadowed front seats. He didn't want some other car taking the door out of his hand or crushing him against the Voks.

The seats were empty. So was the dark area below them. He needed light, but the interior bulb either was burned out or broken. He put a hand on the driver's seat and instantly retracted it. The seat was damp.

Scowling, he held his hand up against the dim light of an oncoming car. Areas of his palm and fingertips were dark and sticky. He knew he was staring at blood recently leaked by someone.

He looked inside the van again, inhaled deeply. The odor remained strong. There was a deep expanse of black area behind the seats, the exterior fog and the interior window curtains cutting off all light.

He had two quick thoughts. One, he envisioned his .45 securely tucked in its rig, the rig snug in a locked drawer in his apartment. Two, what would he find if he were to crawl into the dark rear of the van?

He put a toe on the narrow running board of the Volks and

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hoisted his weight up. The toe slipped out from under him and he pitched. A knee digging into the cushion of the driver's seat and a hand clamping the back of the seat prevented him from spilling on his nose.

He righted himself, stared into the blackness. Dampness had seeped through his trouser leg and spread across his implanted knee, but he felt some relief, too. No one had attacked from the darkness.

He lit a match and grunted in its first flare. The rear area of the van was flat, all extra seats down. There was also the form of a long man stretched out face up.

The match flame flickered out. Shayne went over the seats and inched forward, running a hand up the leg and torso of the inert body to guide himself. He lit a second match, cupped it to a steady burn, then held it over the man.

He was looking at a corpse.

The dead man looked around thirty although a full head of long hair, a bushy beard and deep skin lines etched away from the corners of his eyes and sagging mouth gave a first impression that he was much older.

He wore scuffed sandals, no socks, tight jeans, a wide studded belt, a lightweight pale turtleneck shirt and an open jean jacket. His toes were dirty. Thin slashes across his exposed wrists had oozed blood and there were several punctures in his chest and abdomen, each stained and beginning to crust.

Flame burned Shayne's fingertips. He snapped out the match, lit another, inventoried the area. Using an index finger, he lifted the folds of the open jacket and searched—no knife, no instrument with sharp edges or point of any kind.

"Mich-ael?"

Lucy Hamilton's tentative summons from the front of the van came just as he snapped out the match flame. He crawled toward the seats. "Use the phone in the Side Door, Angel. Call the cops. Tell 'em they've got a homicide."

He went over the seats and outside, where he sucked a deep breath, then saw Lucy standing at the rear of the van. He slammed the door and went to her, took her up on the sidewalk.

"Michael," she said simply, "we're not in Miami, where Will Gentry is boss. We're in Miami Beach, where Peter Painter is."

He waved her down. He saw through her thinking. Will Gentry, chief of Miami police, had been a friend for what seemed centuries. Peter Painter, chief of Miami Beach

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detectives, was an adversary, never had been anything else. If Private detectives, one and all, brought a sneering twist to Painter's carefully penciled moustache, Michael Shayne made Painter regurgitate.

"I don't run, Angel," Shayne reminded Lucy.

"Michael!" She was piqued. "I know that! But you are not working on a case! This is an evening out! It is social! All I'm saying is we can go home! Peter Painter doesn't have to know you've been here! Someone else can discover the body! If this were a case, then—"

He chucked her jaw with a curled forefinger, shutting off her outburst. "Mother hen," he chided, added, "Petey won't stick his beak outside on a night like this. He might get his crease wrinkled in the damp."

He went inside the Side Door and called the Miami Beach police.

Apparently it was a dull Friday night for cops. It seemed to Shayne that his call brought the bulk of the on-duty Miami Beach police force to the Volks van. Cops creeped in out of the thick fog like hungry ants.

The redhead was acquainted with some of Painter's key detectives. None showed. But that figured—Friday night was the beginning of a weekend, and

the top boys wouldn't be drawing weekend tricks.

A young detective named Hogan was in command. Hogan was of the new breed. He was smartly dressed, obviously educated, calm, polite, efficient, and he listened to Shayne and Lucy Hamilton without interrupting. When Shayne finished, Hogan nodded.

"And do you have an opinion about the hit, Mr. Shayne?" he asked politely.

"None."

Hogan lifted an eyebrow. "That surprises me. Although this is our first meeting, I am familiar with your reputation, of course."

"I was curious, had my nose out and found a corpse, that's

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all, Hogan. I reported the finding. Citizen's duty. You happen to know the guy?"

"A man named Thomas Wayne Cross," the police detective said. "Also known as Thomas Wayne, more commonly known as Peanuts Cross. Nomad, panhandler, smalltime gambler, very smalltime gambler—nickel and dime—no ties to organized crime. Cross picked up the shavings, what the big boys dropped or ignored, operated out of his van on a street corner."

Shayne searched his cavernous memory. "Sorry, the guy doesn't ring bells for me." He started to turn away from Hogan.

"But I want you to come down to headquarters anyway," said the police detective.

Shayne stiffened. "What the hell for?"

"Mr. Shayne," Hogan said patiently, "you are a Miami private investigator of some reputation—shall we say a few cuts above other Miami private investigators?—but more important to me, your presence in Miami Beach is always of particular interest to my superior, Chief Painter, and when you *just happen* to discover a murder victim in his city, well . . . "

Hogan let the thought hang with a slight shrug of mock helplessness.

Christ! thought Shayne. *He's one of Painter's fair-haired boys!*

"Hogan," he growled. To balk was reflexive where Peter Painter was involved.

"I can have you taken in," the police detective said gently, "or I can have some of my men free your car and you may drive to headquarters."

"So I should have listened to my secretary," snapped Shayne, turning to the Buick.

"Perhaps," Hogan agreed. "Depending, of course, on what Miss Hamilton attempted to convey to you."

II

PETER PAINTER, chief of Miami Beach detectives, swept into police headquarters like a delayed hurricane. He might be late in arriving, but when he landed he dominated.

He was clad in mod English, was small in stature, polished and subtly cologned. He exuded the impression of being a much larger man than he actually was. Those who wrote off the impression to facade were due for a shock. Painter had three loves—detective work, social life, his wife. In that order. Only the first two were interchangeable.

This foggy Friday night he had been entertaining in his

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Bal Harbour home. There were thirty guests, the most important being the Miami Beach mayor. So it had taken the likes of a volcanic eruption to drag him to headquarters.

Hogan didn't quite stand at attention as he briefed the chief of detectives but he reported to his superior in almost military fashion. Painter ran a finger across his thin black moustache and swayed on the balls of his feet as he listened to Hogan. He began to smile. There was glee in the smile but no humor. Hogan continued to talk and Painter's swaying increased in tempo. Shayne briefly envisioned Painter as a cobra about to strike.

Then the redhead had had enough. He slammed the front legs of his chair against the floor and shot to his feet.

"Painter," he growled, "catch me tomorrow. I'll be available on Flagler. Come on, Lucy. Let's go!"

She put a mildly restraining hand on his arm. "Michael, perhaps—".

Painter spun on them. His eyes glittered, the moustache danced. "Down the corridor, Shayne," he said darkly. "My office. You, too, Miss Hamilton."

Shayne balked again. Lucy patted his arm. "Let's clear this up tonight, Michael. You may have other work to do tomorrow."

He shot her a hard look. Brown eyes pleaded. She was on the edge of being domineering. But he knew she was being practical too. He grated his molars.

They went down a short corridor to a door marked *Private*. Painter was three yards ahead of them. He swept the door open and marched around a sparkling bare desk and sat. There were two straight chairs in front of the desk. Shayne turned one of the chairs around with a snap of his hand and dropped spread-legged onto it, fastening his eyes on the dapper man, who became dwarfed in the chair behind the desk. Lucy Hamilton sat down quietly beside the redhead and crossed her knees.

"I'll appreciate frankness, of course," Painter said flatly. "You told Detective Hogan you discovered the body simply because your car was jammed in a parking area and you were attempting to free it. But you and I know that is hogwash. Oh, I know you are not wearing your gun."

Painter waved a hand delicately. "And I know you are not a killer—not a *paid* killer. But then Cross wasn't shot, either. So let us say you were meeting him on behalf of a client. Cross

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pulled a knife on you for a reason I assume you will provide, you muscled him and Cross died. Now, that's simple enough, Shayne. A jury probably will understand. But at this point in time *I'd* like some elaboration. I'd like—"

"Petey," Shayne interrupted, "no client. I'm not working on a case. The only time I ever saw Cross in my life was tonight. Dead!"

"I see," Painter spoke slowly. It was almost a purr. He fingered the moustache. "Then perhaps," he continued, "you will favor me with speculation about how and why Cross died?" He waved the hand again, attemtping to convey an at-ease attitude. "It will be an opinion only, of course."

Shayne smelled trap. Painter was reaching, grasping. It was an ancient investigative ploy—keep a man talking and eventually he may say something to snap a noose.

He snorted. "Petey . . . "

Lucy's hand found his arm. Her fingers dug in slightly. He snapped a look at her. She was stony of face. But her eyes talked.

"Okay," he said, his voice just a notch above a rasp, "Cross was a two-bitter. His joint was the van. So he comes up against some dude who carries a six-inch folding sticker, probably a dude with a short fuse. Cross and dude are having a meet in the front seats of the van—who knows what about? maybe a twenty cent longshot came in—there's a disagreement, dude gets out his sticker and goes to work on Cross.

"I'd say he stabbed Cross three or four times while Cross was sitting behind the steering wheel, but Cross wouldn't die. So dude yanks Cross into the back end of the van, makes swipes at his wrists with the blade, then sticks him a few more times in the torso.

"When Cross finally conks, dude folds his blade and goes down the street and has a beer. Or he runs like hell. Either way, you're looking for a spur-of-the-moment killer, Petey. I don't think too many guys will *plan* to murder in front of a popular watering hole on the main drag of Miami Beach."

Shayne paused significantly. "Even with the benefit of a fog."

He stood up then, flipped his chair around. Painter looked up. His stare glittered like polished marble. "Interesting, Shayne," he said. "Vague and wispy like the fog, but even I must admit there's just enough meat in what you say to confuse a jury. You might even *convince* a jury."

He hesitated, then turned on

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the cobra smile again. "But how do you propose to explain away the rather large blood stain on the knee of your trousers, the stain coming from blood that will, I think, match that of Cross when we make the comparison?"

Shayne gripped the back of the chair hard. His fingers worked as he struggled for composure. "It'll match, Petey," he said. "You know it, I know it. I got it climbing inside the van. But no jury is going to—"

He shut off the words. *"Lucy!"*

She snapped up from the chair.

Shayne kept his eyes on Painter. "Book and take, Petey. And we want to hear our rights, of course. Too, I believe we are entitled to represen—"

Painter lost his composure. "Miss Hamilton is not involved!"

"Why the hell not? She held open the door of the van while I crawled inside and killed the guy!" said Shayne.

Painter left his chair. Pink splotches were alive in his cheeks. His face muscles danced. His mustache quivered. Suddenly he waved an arm wide and said, "Get out of here, Shayne!"

Shayne walked Lucy down the corridor to the elevator in silence. Riding down, she finally ventured, "Michael, I feel as if this building might explode around us."

"Naw," said Shayne gruffly. "Painter knows. Underneath all that gloss is a logical man. His second nature is to wheel, to deal, to manipulate. But his first nature is to be a good cop. He thinks. Unfortunately—for him—I seem to jar him out of both natures for brief periods. But then he starts thinking again.

"He's sitting up there right now, Angel, thinking. He knows damn well he should never have left his guests tonight. He knows damn well I'm not a killer. But he did leave the guests and he made the accusation. Right now I think he's sitting up there in his office and trying to wipe the egg off his face."

III

SATURDAY MORNING was bright. Shayne left his bed a few minutes after eight o'clock and stood at a window in pajama bottoms, ruffling his coarse red hair. A foggy Friday night, a dead Thomas Wayne Cross and an agitating Peter Painter were behind him. No client. No case. Cross belonged to the Miami Beach cops.

So why was he restless?

Shayne fixed and ate break-

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fast, turning to the morning newspaper with his second cup of coffee. The story about his grisly discovery was on an inside page. No big play. Cross had not been a big man. Obviously, the story had not been written by his friend of many years, Tim Rourke, the veteran newspaperman who normally was handed most of the major crime yarns. The story lacked Rourke's touch and care.

A paragraph held Shayne. Either the writer had overreacted to a Painter statement or Painter had been viciously strong when he had said Michael Shayne, Miami private eye, remained a suspect in spite of not being in custody.

Shayne snapped down the newspaper, stood and paced the confines of the kitchen. He figured he might have grounds for a libel suit against the paper or a slander suit against Painter—perhaps both.

On the other hand, he had little time for lawsuits. And the newspaper publicity might be good. He was between cases, refreshed, ready for action of any kind.

He dressed and drove to police headquarters where—while striding back to Records Division—he tossed waves right and left to cops he had become acquainted with over the years. Dobson, an old hand, had drawn the Saturday morning trick in Records.

But Dobson returned to the counter without a folder and wearing a light frown. He went to a checkout box, thumbed it. "I don't get it, Shayne," he said. "We've got a sheet on Cross, okay, but his package has been pulled. I wonder who the hell is interested in—oh, oh, Chief Gentry."

Dobson pulled a card, said, "Chief Gentry checked out the Cross package about an hour ago, according to this. Just before I took over. I guess that may make this Cross more than just a run-of-the-mill dude."

Will Gentry, chief of Miami police, was a tough, hard-working, intelligent, logical cop. Shayne and Gentry had had their outs with one another, but basically they were friends, respecting—and more important—trusting each other.

So it was with a deep frown corrugating his brow that Shayne left Records and strode up to Gentry's private domain. The chief normally cherished his weekends for boating—so why was he at headquarters this bright Saturday? And what was his interest in Thomas Wayne Cross, a Miami Beach nickel gambler?

Gentry, talking around the stub of a dead cigar butt jam-

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med in one corner of his mouth, provided the answers readily. "In spite of thinking in some quarters, I *am* chief of police of this city seven days a week and I have things to do here this morning."

"Cross?" Gentry continued. He took the cigar butt from his lips, made a production of looking at its soggy end. "When I read in my newspaper, Mike, that you have been busy the previous evening—even over in Miami Beach—I get nervous. I get the feeling something might be going on I don't know about but should. So I pull a package on a peanut man, soak up a few statistics. Commonly called PYOB—Protecting Your Own Butt. Just in case."

He returned the cigar stub to the corner of his mouth, fixed Shayne with a steady stare. "So fill me in. What's your hookup with a nothing like Cross?"

"No ties, Will." Shayne explained, and Gentry nodded. Then he asked suspiciously, "The sortie to Records this morning?"

"Painter," said Shayne. He got up and walked around the office, lit a cigarette, drew the smoke deep. "As usual, Petey wants my hide, which means he's going to be dogging me until his people come up with the killer, so I figured the more I know about Cross the better.

"I don't need any surprises from Petey—like having him toss Cross at me as a goon who was in the enemy camp on some case I've handled. Cross doesn't blink any lights with me, but there's always the chance we may have banged heads somewhere and I've forgotten. If that did happen, reading your sheets might jog my memory."

Gentry pushed the folder across his desk. "Okay, be the guest of the Miami Police Department. But you're not going to get much from this, Mike. Cross lived here most of his life, has a record from back in his juvenile days. It's all flea stuff—vag pickups, small fry gambling, overnight in one of our cells occasionally. Then Dave Byers finally picked him up on a pimp suspicion. It was enough for Dave—he'd had a bellyful of Cross. He hustled Cross over to Miami Beach and posted Off Limits signs on all of the causeways leading back here."

Veteran police detective Dave Byers was a hardnose. He had the patience of a good parent, but he had a saturation point, too. When he was saturated, he moved fast. A man got a long stretch in the slammer or a one-way ticket out of the city.

Shayne drew on his cigarette, eyed the folder. He didn't need

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to read it now. Gentry's summary was enough. He headed for the door. "Thanks, Will. Good enough for me. I won't keep you from your other—"

"However," Gentry interrupted.

Shayne stopped dead in the doorway, looked back at his friend.

Gentry said, "Just a sidelight. I talked to Detective Hogan about thirty minutes ago. I called to offer what little we have on Cross. Hogan has something this morning. From what I read in the paper, I thought Cross had been knifed to death. Not true, says Hogan. Oh, he'd been cut and punctured with a blade, okay, but now the Beach boys are figuring it was with an ordinary pocket knife. Most of the skin slices were superficial and the punctures were shallow. Cause of death was a broken neck."

Shayne frowned as he placed himself mentally in the role of the attacker. The attacker and Cross could have been sitting in the front seats of the van. The attacker could have punctured from that point. But Cross would not die. He continued to struggle. The attacker could have gone over the seat into the back of the van, hooked an arm under Cross' chin and yanked. It was possible that he snapped Cross' neck in that instant but, not realizing what had happened, had pulled Cross on into the back, sliced his exposed wrists and stabbed his torso again and again in a frenzy until it dawned on him that Cross was dead.

Shayne said slowly, "A snapped neck, Will—that takes luck, abnormal strength or skill."

Gentry agreed, then he sat back in his chair and bobbed the cigar. "But knife or snap, Cross' death remains Painter's headache, right?"

Shayne shook off a premonition that had flicked alive inside him for just a second. "It's finished for me, Will," he said.

"Good. I don't need Cross. I've already got too many other things on the fire."

The redhead's grin was sudden. "I'll go out and find a nice quiet trace-job, friend."

"Do that." The chief spoke bluntly, bending over his desk again and reaching for a stack of folders. "Find something quiet, something I won't be remotely interested in—but find it fast, will you? You're as restless as a cat in heat."

"Just between cases, Will."

"That's what bothers me."

Shayne chuckled and departed. Things were so slow he toyed with the idea of taking a vacation. Perhaps a month in

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Hawaii—or maybe he'd just take a drive across the United States.

But he was still in his office on Flagler Street, doing nothing, late Tuesday morning of the following week when he received the telephone call from a man named Andrew Weber.

IV

SHAYNE WAS READING the day's paper for the third time when the call came. He had found accounts of four homicides, two reported rapes, a thwarted attempt at robbing a branch bank, numerous marijuana busts. Nothing too exciting. Among the homicides was a man who had drowned his girl friend in a water bed, another who had shot a friend during a game of dominoes, a mother-in-law who had killed her son-in-law with a kitchen knife, plus one little mystery—a young man named Bert Jackson, who worked in the service department of a branch store of the city's largest furniture outfit, had been assassinated as he walked out of a beer joint across the street from the Sea Breeze Shopping Center.

Jackson had been shotgunned from a car that sped away. Nobody knew why Jackson had been a target—he was a clean cut, hand-to-mouth worker with a wife and a mortgage and bills to pay. All of Jackson's friends were mystified. So were the cops.

Shayne put the newspaper aside with Lucy Hamilton's announcement of the call from Andrew Weber. He swept up the receiver.

"Is this—Mr. Shayne?" Weber's voice had a ring of youth.

"Shayne speaking." He made it crisp.

"Mr. Shayne, I'm not sure how to explain—er, to say this. I've never had dealings with private detectives or police or . . . "Weber paused. Then, "Mr. Shayne, I'd like to talk to you!"

"What about?"

"Well, I read in the newspaper last Saturday that you—you found a dead man in Miami Beach. The one in the Volkswagen—Tom Cross."

"Yeah?" Shayne's gray eyes narrowed and he tightened his grip on the phone.

"And last night Bert Jackson was killed—murdered! I mean he was shot down on—"

"Easy, Mr. Weber," Shayne interrupted. He attempted to sound soothing. Tension was mounting fast in the voice in his ear. "I was just reading about Mr. Jackson in the paper," the redhead continued.

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"Did you know the two victims?"

"Yes! You didn't kill Tom Cross, did you?"

"No."

"I didn't mean that like it sounded, Mr. Shayne. I mean, I don't know anything about private detectives, but the newspaper said the Miami Beach police suspected you, and . . . Oh, hell, none of this is coming out right."

"It's okay, Mr. Weber," said Shayne, still attempting to placate. "Say what you have to say any way you want to. I'll put it together."

"No, Mr. Shayne. I'm sorry I've troubled you with this call. Forget it—I'm going to hang up."

"Weber!" Shayne snapped into the mouthpiece.

The line continued to hum. Shayne knew he had captured the caller. At least briefly. He said, "Mr. Weber, you're doing okay. You wouldn't have called if you thought I killed Tom Cross."

"That's true."

Shayne breathed more easily. He had held the caller. "Okay, so we're on the same wave length, right?"

"Yes—I guess we are," said Weber.

"You want to meet some place and rap?"

"Yes, that's why I called."

"Name the place and the time."

"Angie's? It's on—"

"I know," the redhead interrupted—an intentional interruption, designed to convey mutual familiarity. "What do you need, twenty minutes, thirty, an hour—or are you calling from Angie's?"

"It will have to be five o'clock this afternoon, Mr. Shayne. I can't leave the office before four forty-five and it's about a ten minute walk from here."

"Okay. Now, since we're not acquainted, Mr. Weber, I'll be outside, waiting for you. Look for a redhead in a gray suit, gray hat."

"Yes, all right, Mr. Shayne. I am blond, wearing a maroon leisure suit. I do not wear a hat. I will be approaching from the north."

"Mr. Weber?"

"Yes?"

"You said you knew Cross and Jackson. Can I jump to a conclusion and assume Cross and Jackson were acquainted?"

"Once the three of us—no, the four of us—Mr. Shayne, that's what I want to rap about. Bert Jackson and I were . . . It may sound complicated over a phone. It isn't, but . . . We'll rap about it at Angie's, okay?"

"Sure."

"I've got this creepy feeling, Mr. Shayne. That's what it is, a creepy feeling about Tom Cross

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being killed the way he was, and then last night Bert being shot down on the street."

"You figure there's a tie."

"Yes. Well—I mean, there *could* be a tie, right? I mean, two men, *murdered* the way they were, both of them killed just days apart . . . "Mr. Shayne, I told you it would get complicated!"

The redhead, said "All right, keep your cool, Mr. Weber. Stay loose. These things usually aren't as mind boggling as people make them. There's logic somewhere. We'll put it together."

"Thanks, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne sat with a large hand covering the handset long after he had put the phone together. His brow was corrugated. Premonition was alive and strong in him again. He had a hunch he was on the brink of becoming involved in two murders, that, on the surface, were as unrelated as beer and milk but were actually like vodka and orange juice.

Buy why had Andrew Weber called a private eye? Why didn't he call the police?

Weber had sounded wound up tight, probably frightened. But how come? He said he had been acquainted with the two victims. He said the victims were acquainted. Was he implying that he might be the third side

LUCY HAMILTON

of a triangle? Were Cross, Jackson and Weber a package of some kind?

Question—if they were tightly knit, what was the common denominator? Was that what had turned Weber from calling the cops? Shayne lifted his hand from the phone and ruffled his red hair. Weber hadn't mentioned hiring him but that could come at Angie's.

Shayne stood and took the worn shoulder rig and glistening .45 from the drawer of a filing cabinet behind him. He

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strapped on the rig, shrugged into his coat again. It gave him a comfortable feeling. He didn't have a client—yet—but he felt as if he was back in harness again.

V

HE STOOD OUTSIDE Angie's at 4:45 p.m. He was a shoulder's width from the entry, out of the main flow of the heavy sidewalk traffic. The many office buildings in the area were spilling humanity. It was quitting time. Some of that humanity, mostly male, turned into Angie's. It seemed to be a popular watering hole.

Mike Shayne kept an eye peeled to the north, watching for a fair-haired young man wearing a maroon leisure suit. He glanced at his watch. It read four-fifty-five. Weber had said Angie's was a ten minute walk from his office. He should be coming along now.

The redhead searched the north flow again and spotted a young man, hatless, blond, wearing maroon. He was tightroping the curb, hustling along on the edge of the main stream.

Shayne fished a crumpled package of cigarettes and a book of matches from his jacket pocket. He stuck a cigarette in his lips, flicked a match alive, cupped it against the breeze and ducked his head to get the light.

The sound of the blast smote his ears in that instant.

He looked up. He couldn't move. All he saw was a ragged piece of blond scalp flying over the careening sidewalk crowd.

Pedestrians folded away amid shouted oaths, groans of revulsion and screams of terror to fashion what—for a few seconds—looked like the formation of a new volcano.

Then the formation collapsed in waves of bobbing, shoving, babbling flight. Some pedestrians reversed direction, Others pushed out and around the scalp, inching along with eyes riveted on the sidewalk, before breaking. Some moved into the street, ignoring the heavy rush hour traffic. There was a bulge of people out at the curb and its perimeter continued to enlarge.

Shayne moved toward it, arms pushing his way through against the flow of the tide, knowing what he was to find.

The hips and upper torso of the young man lay on the sidewalk. His legs and feet extended into the street. An arm lay stretched from under what was left of the head. Most of the scalp was gone. What remained was a pudding of reddish liquid and grayish globs.

Shayne broke through the perimeter of the crowd and

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went down on one knee beside the body. Andrew Weber was dead. He lay on his side, facing away from the detective, his feet in an empty parking slot.

Shayne shook his head. When he took up his station at Angie's the curb parking slots had been filled for as far as he could see in any direction. The now-empty slot had been occupied by a dark green and dusty sedan—a small sedan, four to six years old—a Ford.

There had been a lone man in the driver's seat. The motor had been running, the front wheels of the sedan turned out to enter street traffic. But the driver appeared to be having trouble entering the glut. No one in the heavy street flow had given him a break. So he had been sitting there against the curbing . . .

No! He had not been edging.

Mike Shayne dug deeper into his memory bank. The driver of the sedan had been playing cat-and-mouse. He had wanted it to *look* as if he were having difficulty moving into traffic when actually he didn't want to move.

Not until after he had shotgunned Andrew Weber.

Then the driver had moved out, taking a risk, sure, but knowing damn well he wasn't going to stop even if he crumpled another fender getting into the flow of traffic. His single risk was that he might become involved in a crash that would make the Ford inoperative.

Even then he could bail out and flee on foot.

Shayne searched for more mental replays—but nothing else was as sharp. Ford sedan, yes. Driver a Caucasian, sitting of average shoulder width, wearing wide plantation hat on the back of his head, a shiny jacket—and sun glasses? Yeah, large shades, the rims coming far down on the cheek. Shayne had seen in profile.

That was all he recalled. He patted the back pockets of the dead man. Nothing. He reached over the body and shoved a hand inside the coat. His probing fingers went into a sticky glob. He whipped the hand free, glanced at the gray strings dangling from his fingers, snapped them away.

Then he found a pocket billfold. He flipped it open, inventoried the identification card. The dead man was Andrew Weber, 4075 Circle Drive, Miami. He returned the billfold to the pocket, stood up and looked around.

There was a ring of curious faces, most slightly ashen, eyes bright and unblinking. Still, their owners did not move. He knew they were paralyzed by fascination.

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He moved his eyes from face to face. There had to be one—probably more than one—among them who had had a ringside seat for the assassination, someone who had been coming along behind Weber, someone who had seen the killer lift the shotgun from the sedan seat and fire, someone who could provide a good description of the killer, a license plate number, both.

"Who saw it?" the redhead asked.

Eyes danced toward him, became riveted. He moved around in a slow pivot, looking for a telltale sign on a face, waiting for someone to offer. But no one said a word. A general shuffling began. The crowd inched back.

Then he heard a siren in the distance. It was moving in fast and it was joined by the sound of other sirens from different directions. The cops were closing in. Shayne decided he didn't need them. He'd only add to the confusion. He pushed through the mob and returned to Angie's.

Angie's was dim inside, cool, packed with after-off-hour drinkers, but quiet compared to the uproar in the street. He shouldered into a standing slot near one end of the L-shaped bar and ordered a cognac with water chaser. There was only one subject of conversation around him—the shotgun killing outside.

Most of the customers, still excited, talked about the slaying in awe, although there was a callous offering here and there, too. Then down the bar a young man suddenly said, "Sure, I knew Andy—Andy Weber, that's his name! Hell, I've been working with him for three years. Well, not *with* him, but in the same office. He was a copy writer, too, had a couple of the better accounts."

From somewhere there was a question.

"Horn and Phelps Advertising Agency, yes. We're with Horn and Phelps. Fred—*Fred,* a refill."

The young man pushed his glass toward a bald bartender. He shook his head. "God, I can't believe he's out there on the street, dead! It just doesn't seem real! And his wife! Can you imagine what it must be like for *her*?"

Another question from a vague corner.

"Yeah, two kids—and another in the pot. Andy told me a few months ago. Fred—hurry that refill, *huh*? Hey, let's talk about something else. That business out there on the street gives me the creeps."

"Fred!" said Shayne.

The bartender snapped a look

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at him, eyes narrowing slightly in reaction to the tone of the summons. He was short, maybe sixty, probably wise with years of experience behind the bar, Mike Shayne figured.

The redhead flashed his I.D. quickly, snapped the billfold shut and got the reaction he wanted. Fred protested, "Hey, look, this is the rush hour in here. Okay, you're a cop and you've got a bad scene outside. I sympathize, but we've got to make the buck when the buck is here. How bout a couple of hours from now? make it seven or a little after. Things will slow. I don't know what you want from me, but I'll be here. I'm on tonight. Okay?"

"*Now*, Fred. Just a couple of questions. Let's find a back-room, an office."

Fred took Shayne out the rear door of the building and into an alley. He lit a cigarette and said, "Can you ask questions fast?"

"You knew Andrew Weber?"

"Like I know a hundred of those guys in there. I know 'em from five to seven, week nights."

"Weber stopped in every evening?"

"Naw. Maybe three a week."

"Ever cause any trouble in your place, have any?"

"Naw. If anything, he leaned the other way. Quiet type. Didn't mix much. Occasionally came in with someone else. Like Jerry in there. That was Jerry blowing off to the world. But I wouldn't read anything into Jerry. He likes attention."

"Weber ever come in with strangers?"

"Not in my memory. Most of the time—like I said—he was alone. Had a couple of beers and then cut. He wasn't what you'd call a big spender, but a nice kid. I liked him. It beats hell out of me why a kid like him would get killed unless the killer is a crazie who just picks someone from a crowd for the hell of it."

"There's always that possibility," Shayne admitted. Then he asked, "Know a man named Bert Jackson?"

"No."

"He'd be about Weber's age."

"I know a couple of Jacksons, but I don't recall a Bert Jackson."

"He and Weber might have been friends. How about a Tom Cross?"

The bartender flicked his cigarette away, frowned. "No. Can I see your shield again?"

"Why?"

"There's something about you—what was the name I saw on that ticket? Shayne? Yeah, there's something about you, Shayne, something about that name. I swear to Christ I've

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seen that name recently. That name and the name Cross. Know what, Shayne? All of a sudden I've got a hunch you're not a copper."

Shayne got out a twenty, folded it, put it in the man's shirt front between buttons. "You've been helpful."

He walked out of the alley, turned down the sidewalk and moved on to the Buick. It was time to drop all this and go home.

He spent a couple of hours aiming the Buick in that direction. He stopped for a burger, moved on to a small bar he knew, drank two cognacs. Andrew Weber, sprawled on a curbing, dead, the top of his skull blown away, remained vivid on his mind. A tie—Weber, someone named Bert Jackson, a corpse over on the Beach—nagged.

Shayne knew he was hooked. He didn't have a client, he wasn't being paid, but he was hooked. Alcoholics had their lure, drug users theirs. Shayne had his!

VI

CIRCLE DRIVE WAS just what the name implied, a quiet street immediately behind the Sea Breeze Shopping Center. It opened from a main artery and two blocks later curved back to the entry.

Mike Shayne turned into the swing again, aiming for a squat yellow bungalow almost halfway around the circle. On his first circuit he had spotted the police patrol car parked in front of the yellow bungalow, an unmarked sedan behind the patrol car. He guessed the unmarked car belonged to detectives.

He braked a couple of houses beyond the bungalow, sat looking around. It was a modest, quiet area, the bungalows similar in construction, probably in the $30,000 range. There were small, neatly trimmed green yards out front, some flowers, and most of the driveways contained medium-priced automobiles. There was a doll buggy here and there, a tricycle, a child's wagon.

Shayne walked up to the bungalow. He stepped over some plastic toys and knocked on a screen door. The door behind it was open and a uniformed policeman appeared immediately. "Yes?" he said.

"Mrs. Weber, please."

"She's . . . "The policeman cut off the words, glanced over his shoulder. *"Sergeant."*

Shayne took those seconds to open the screen door and step inside. He stood just inside a large, sparsely-furnished living room. The carpeting was cheap

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and thin, dotted with children's toys. There were two ancient overstuffed chairs, spaced far apart, a new, bright-colored uncomfortably-looking couch that would pull out into a bed. A tiny black-and-white TV set perched on a drum that had once held telephone cable.

A young woman, ashen in color and crying, sat turned and cocked tightly on the edge of one of the overstuffed chairs. She wore an inexpensive print smock and was barefooted, looked pregnant. She sat small and stiff as she stared at the detective with wet eyes.

The room remained silent. The cop was immediately to Shayne's left. Another uniformed patrolman stood across the room in an entry flanked by half-wall counters that exposed a kitchen. To the detective's right were two men in business suits, sitting side by side on the edge of the bright couch. Both were staring too.

The redhead addressed the girl. "My name, Mrs. Weber, is Mike Shayne. I—"

"Shayne!" exploded one of the men on the couch. He shot to his feet.

"Sergeant Wysuski," he snapped. "Police. *Out*, Shayne! You don't belong here!"

"Easy, Sergeant," said Shayne, summoning patience. Wysuski was young, trim, medium-statured, swarthy. His clothing fitted, his black shoes were polished, he wore mod glasses. Behind them were light-colored eyes. Shayne didn't know him. He had to be a new man in Will Gentry's stable.

"Sergeant," began the detective, "I'm here because—"

"I'm not interested in why you are here, Shayne!" Wysuski cut in. "I'm interested in your departure. *Now*!"

Shayne steeled himself.

"I know who you are, Shayne," Wysuski went on. "And that's enough for me! I don't need you, I don't want you. You can play nightly poker with Chief Gentry, the Pope and Jimmy the Greek—but I don't want you! A private detective—*any* private detective—is a parasite and a potential killer with a license. Do you read me, Shayne?"

"I read you, Sergeant," Shayne cut in, grinding his teeth, "I read that you're going to have a helluva time making lieutenant in Will Gentry's shop—or anywhere else!"

"Is that a threat?" Wysuski swelled, jabbed at his glasses with a stiff forefinger, looked around. "Officer, get this man out of this house!"

The uniformed man to Shayne's left touched his elbow. "Mr. Shayne?"

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But Shayne stood his ground for a few more seconds. He looked at the crying girl and saw a light in her eyes. He knew she had recognized his name. "I'll return to see you in the morning, Mrs. Weber," he said.

She didn't move, but the redhead knew he would be accepted. He took another few seconds. "Was Bert Jackson married?" he asked.

The girl looked mildly surprised, then stammered, "Yes."

"Where can I find his wife?"

"They have—had—well, I suppose she's still in the trailer. Palm Courts."

"Officer, get Shayne *out of here*!" Wysuski shouted.

Shayne went outside, walked to the Buick and got inside. He sat drumming fingers on the steering wheel, allowing his blood to cool. The sparsely-furnished interior of the bungalow, the attire of the young girl, had surprised him. Each painted a picture of hand-to-mouth living. No extras inside that house, probably not even some of the essentials. That afternoon he had thought Weber to be a potential client. No way. The Webers didn't have that kind of bread. So why had Andrew Weber called him?

He eased the Buick around the circle again and out to the main avenue. At least he knew Weber's call had not been an independent act. Mrs. Weber's recognition of his name had been enough—he knew he had been discussed by man and wife. Maybe he'd get some answers from her in the morning.

He stopped at a public telephone booth in the Sea Breeze Shopping Center parking lot and looked up an address for Palm Courts. It was a forty-five minute drive and warm night had settled on the city when he walked in and out of the manager's office and then along a row of lighted mobile homes that had been removed from their wheels and planted.

At Lot 8, a large, solid looking man of fifty years opened a door to Shayne's knock. He filled the entry and gave the impression that it was going to take straight talk or strength to make him move. Shayne started with straight talk "Mrs. Jackson, Please."

"You are, sir?" the man asked curtly.

"Mike Shayne—private investigations."

The man frowned slightly. He looked curious. But he said, "Mrs. Jackson does not have time to talk to you, Mr. Shayne."

"Who says so?"

"Her father."

Shayne leveled, "I'm here about the assassinations—Mr.

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Jackson's and a young man named Andrew Weber. It's my understanding the two were acquainted. Each also was shotgunned by an unknown assailant."

The large man came out of the mobile home, closed the door behind him. He moved to the end of the short walk and stood under a gas-fed yard light at the edge of the macadam street. He was as straight as an arrow with shoulders squared and head level. His hair was short and trimmed in a conservative cut. He stood as tall as Shayne, but not quite as heavy. He wore a fresh sports shirt and unwrinkled slacks. His shoes twinkled from an expert polish even in the dim gas light.

The man took a new cigar from a shirt pocket, clipped the end, lit it and stared into the distance. Shayne was not surprised when he finally said, "My name is Albert Cummings, U.S. Marine Corps, Colonel, Retired. What the Christ is going on, Shayne? Bert gunned down last night, young Weber tonight. We heard about Weber on the news. What kind of a mess were those kids in?"

Before Shayne could reply, Cummings faced him. "First, however," he said, staring holes into the redhead, "what's your interest? Have you been em-

WILL GENTRY

ployed to investigate? If so, by whom?"

They moved side by side along the macadam street toward the office in front. Surprisingly, Cummings set a slow pace, his only sign of tension was a rapid puffing on the cigar. But he remained silent, waiting for explanations. Shayne bet himself it was Corps training—a colonel asked questions, he expected immediate replies.

The redhead found Colonel Cummings a schooled listener. They had reached the parking lot opposite the office and Shayne had braced his hips against a front fender of the

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Buick by the time he finished briefing the older Man. Cummings had not interrupted him once.

Now he stood about three yards away from the detective, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet as he puffed the cigar and stared out over the traffic of the main street fronting the courts.

Suddenly he said, "Are you good in your profession, Shayne?"

"I eat."

"I'd like to employ you."

"You're what I've been looking for, Colonel."

Cummings snapped a look at him, his face rock hard in the pale glow of the parking area light spilling on them. Abruptly he turned and marched to a glistening new Granada, opened it, ducked inside. A glove compartment light winked. Cummings came out of the car with a checkbook and ballpoint pen, put the book on the top of the Granada and scribbled. He returned to Shayne with a check.

The redhead glanced at the figure, said, "Adequate for now. It retains and more. If I clear this up in a couple of days, you'll get some refund."

"I've spent most of my life judging men, Shayne," Cummings replied. "I don't think I'll be writing another check. Now, what do you want to know from me?"

"For starters," said the detective, "I'll get a little insight if you'll tell me why you are not particularly disturbed by the death of your son-in-law."

Cummings jerked slightly and the lift of the cigar stopped halfway to his mouth. Then he settled. He puffed. "I've seen and been associated with much death in my days, Shayne. I'm hardened to it."

Shayne pushed away from the Buick fender and extended the check. "May I talk briefly with your daughter anyway?"

It broke Cummings. He looked confused. "What the hell is this?"

"When clients lie to me, they are no longer clients," Shayne replied.

Cummings waved his cigar, ignored the extended check, turned. "Let's walk, let's walk," he muttered. They moved along a few strides and then he said, "I didn't want Flo and Bert to marry. I didn't want Flo to marry, period. But if she was to marry, why Bert?

"Sure, he was clean, he was a hard worker, he was faithful. But in the Corps—well, hell, he could have been in the Corps twenty years and he might have made corporal, top grade. That's the kind of kid Bert Jackson was—a furniture-store

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handyman, a good kid, but a furniture-store handyman!" He shook his head.

He waved an arm, looked around. "You see where they're living? In a goddamn trailer court! *My* daughter, living in a trailer court! Those two kids plunked a couple of thousand down, and you'd think this place was a palace!

"Christ only knows how Bert scraped together two thousand in the first place, but scrape and plunk he does—and Flo goes starry-eyed again! She can't see beyond those stars! She can't see she's going to be living in a mobile home all of her life!"

"Where did you want them to live?"

"At home—with us! They did, the first six months they were married! Everything was going okay. We've got a big place, comfortable. But they've got to move into a goddamn trailer court!"

"Your daughter screamed and kicked in resistance all the way out your front door the day her husband took her away?"

Cummings stopped dead in his tracks, swelled. "Shayne," he grated, "maybe I do want my check returned."

"Sure," said the detective. "Here. Your wife, I assume, shares your evaluation of your former son-in-law."

"My wife's feelings are not involved in this matter."

"Uh-huh." The redhead nodded. "Spoken like a true military man. A wife is a subordinate."

"Shayne," Cummings grated, "I'd like to have had your ass in my command."

"Rather than over it?"

Cummings pitched the cigar and stomped away. But ten paces down the street he stopped and whirled. "Damn you, *damn* you!" He bristled.

Shayne continued to hold the check aloft. "Your decision, Cummings. Do I command or do you?"

It was seconds before the older man bent. "Come on inside," he growled. "I wish to hell you'd never come here tonight. I wish to hell . . . "

He chopped off the words, then added, "But from a tactical point of view, I need you. I want your skill. It's your operation, Shayne."

VII

MRS. CUMMINGS WAS a tall, pleasant-looking woman in a pale green pantsuit, narrow in body and face. Although three tiny crowsfeet were stacked on her brow, she seemed in control of her emotions. She listened to her husband explain the private detective, nodded politely

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to Shayne, then turned to her daughter.

"It's your decision, Flo," she said softly.

The plump girl sat in a straight-backed chair at a wall table. One elbow was braced on the table. A fist propped her chin. A knee under the table bobbed as if attached to a vibrator. She was smoking. The package of cigarettes, a filled ashtray and a cup of coffee lay on the table.

Opposite her was an empty chair and Shayne noticed that every time she glanced at that chair, the knee bobbed faster. She wore faded jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt with the reproduction of a popular beer can front and back.

"Some of my questions may seem harsh to you, Mrs. Jackson," said Shayne, "but—"

"Flo," she interrupted. Her eyes were deepset, unwavering, like her father's. Some of his coolness, inborn or cultivated over the years, seemed to have rubbed off on her, too. But that was where any resemblance to either parent ended. Corn colored hair was straight and stringy, she was sloppy in attire and housekeeping, her attitude set off warning bells inside Shayne's skull. She had a thick defensive wall up.

"And I'll call you Mike," she continued. She stubbed out the cigarette in her fingers, lit a new one.

Bert Jackson had been 26, had come to Miami from Montana five years earlier because he had wanted to live in a warm climate. His parents still lived in Montana but were on their way to Miami to attend the funeral service scheduled for Thursday morning.

Bert had worked in the service department of Kelly's branch store in Sea Breeze Shopping Center, Kelly's Downtown being the largest home furnishings store in the city. Sea Breeze was where she and Bert had met. She had been a cafeteria waitress at the shopping center. Bert had eaten his daily lunch there. They were married on Christmas Day, 1972, had moved into her parental home, where they had remained for approximately six months.

Then Bert had produced one of his few surprises—a small stake which they used for a down payment on the mobile home. She had not been aware of the stake. He had simply announced it one day, said he had been saving pennies for a long time. The total amounted to a little more than $2,000. They had plunked it down on the home. The remainder of the stake was still in an account in a savings and loan.

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Yes, she had known Andy Weber—she had met Bert through Andy. Andy and Bert had become acquainted at Kelley's. Andy had once worked in the Sea Breeze branch store, had been in the store's managerial training program. But Andy had displayed talent in advertising layouts, had finally left Kelly's to go with an advertising firm downtown.

Prior to that, Bert and Andy had lunched together daily at the Sea Breeze cafeteria, drunk beer together from around five to seven every evening at Art's. Art's was a small beer joint across the street from the shopping center.

Flo Jackson faltered. "Bert had just left Art's when . . . he was killed last night."

"Was Andy with him?" Shayne asked.

She looked surprised. The knee bobbed rapidly. "No—I don't think he was. If he was . . . "She faded it off, shook her head. "No, if Andy had been with Bert last night, I would have heard from him. Andy hasn't been stopping at Art's for—oh, I guess maybe three years now. That is, he popped in once in a moon, Bert said, but after Andy went downtown . . . well, he just hasn't been stopping.

"Look, those two were buddies once, and I know who Andy's wife is, but that's it. After Andy went downtown things changed. Bert continued to stop in almost nightly at Art's, but Andy—even though he had a house on the Circle just behind the shopping center—quit coming in. Oh, maybe he'd stop and pick up a six-pack once in a while and Bert might be there and they'd jaw a bit, but that was it. Andy just simply quit going to Art's. He had other problems."

"Problems?"

She waved another fresh cigarette, the knee popping up and down rapidly. All she knew was second hand, what she had picked up from Bert. Andy and Betty Weber had two kids, a little boy and a little girl. The little girl had a heart thing, a pacemaker was involved, she knew that much. What it amounted to was Andy Weber had some heavy stuff hanging over his head—two kids, one with a bum ticker, and another kid on the way. Andy just didn't have time or money for much beer drinking.

"Was your husband a gambler, Flo?" asked Shayne.

She looked totally surprised. The knee became frozen. "You're *kidding*, man! Bert might have shot a little craps in an alley in his day, but . . . "

She wagged her head, drew deep on the cigarette. "Bert did-

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n't know the first thing about gambling. He had no interest I ever heard about—and I would have heard. That's a far-out question. How come you asked it?"

"The surprise stake for one thing."

She smoked in silence for a couple of seconds, then said, "No—it was like Bert said. He'd been building a penny cache for a long time."

She suddenly stared Shayne straight in the eye again. "What's the other thing? You're heading somewhere, man."

"Tom Cross. *Peanuts* Cross."

"Who's *he*?" Her frown was deep.

"He was murdered Friday night over in Miami Beach."

"Oh yeah, man. *Now* I've got it! I heard it on the radio, the TV, someplace!" She chopped off the words, stared hard at the detective. "Are you telling me there's a connection between this—this Peanuts Cross and my husband."

"And Andy Weber, maybe."

"You're putting me *on*! Quit jiving, man. Three guys blown . . . "

She suddenly sat back in the chair and lifted her head and hands in revival meeting exhuberance. "Heavy." she said. *"Heavy . . . "*

"Flo!" Shayne rasped it out sharply.

She lowered her head. Her eyes were hard.

"Cross was a penny gambler," he said. "But over months, with luck, a guy might put together two to three thou in winnings."

"Not Bert, man," she said, wagging her head. "No *way*! With what those furniture store creeps were paying him, we—"

"You were living with your parents once," Shayne cut in.

Her cheeks pinked. She stabbed out the cigarette, stood up. Her eyes flashed. "Handouts," she said. "They wanted us to live on *handouts*! No *way*! Sure, we ate in the house, we slept there, and we didn't buy groceries or pay rent! Except, every week, Bert cashed his paycheck, kept twenty bucks in cash for us and the rest went to daddy. What he's done with it I don't give a damn!"

Cummings looked hard when Shayne flashed him a glance. He said flatly, "Every dime of it is in a special bank account. I had hoped that someday they would come to their senses. It's there, a nestegg."

"So I'll use it to pay for a funeral," said Flo bitterly. "But that's between my conceivers and me, Shayne. Point—Bert *couldn't* gamble. He didn't have the bread."

"Andy Weber telephoned me this morning, Flo," said Shayne. "He knew Cross. He

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said your husband was acquainted with Cross, but he didn't explain the connection. Andy was on his way to meet me to do just that when he was killed."

The girl looked perplexed. Her eyes wavered, darted to her mother and father, flashed back to the detective. Then she sat down again, lit a new cigarette with fingers that quivered. She hooked a foot on the chair. The knee bobbed as she smoked.

Finally she said, "If Andy told you Bert knew this Cross dude then Bert knew him. But I don't know from where."

She looked off into space. She was soft now, a girl in her mid-twenties who had been jarred. The built-up, hard outer shell had cracked. She needed a helping hand. It was out there, but she was having trouble reaching and grasping.

Shayne said, "Well, I'll start digging to see if I can put it together, Flo."

She flashed him a troubled look. "Right on, man."

Outside the mobile home, Albert Cummings clipped the end of a fresh cigar and stuck it in his mouth. "I'll walk with you to your car," he said.

On the way he added, "I thought she would grow up in elementary school, begin to mature in high school, go on to a university. By now I should have a well bred, educated son-in-law launched into a profession where he would obviously become a success. I do not."

Shayne remained silent.

"Instead," Cummings continued, "she received straight-A marks, but flaunted other school offerings—as she flaunted every social offering since. She wanted to be a waitress in a cafeteria, a hamburger joint, a pizza hut. And she became a waitress."

"Good for her," said Shayne. He knew Cummings had flashed him a look, but he continued to stride swiftly toward the Buick.

"We want her to move back home with us now, of course," said Cummings. "No more restaurants, no more—"

"You're never going to make it," said Shayne.

Cummings grabbed the redhead's arm, stopped him short. "Shayne," he said coldly, "you don't know anything about my daughter!"

"I know quite a bit about her," said the detective. "Maybe more than you do."

"Bert is out of her life now. So is Andy Weber. I intend to put my family back together."

Shayne frowned. "You had a beef with young Weber?"

Cummings waved the cigar. "No, no beef. It was happenstance. Forget it."

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But Shayne pressed, "*What* was happenstance?"

Cummings put the cigar in his mouth, chomped hard. "Andy introduced Bert to Flo."

"So?"

"So—nothing." Cummings turned to walk away, then stopped and asked, "How do I know how things are going, Shayne? Do you make periodic reports?"

"If I know where to make them."

"Two Rafel Drive."

"And if I have time," added the detective.

Cummings continued to stare at him for a few moments, then turned and marched away. Shayne watched him disappear into the darkness. Cummings was a man who triggered warning signals. He was a cold man, probably tough. If there was bend in him, it was hidden. He was a click-click man, regimented. He probably had been a good man in the Corps, but he was having a rough time on the outside.

And he was a man who had not liked his son-in-law—or his son-in-law's friend. Why?

Shayne got into the Buick, backed around and bounced into the street traffic. Cummings required some study, some digging into his background. How had Will Gentry put it? PYOB.

Shayne wheeled back to the Sea Breeze Shopping Center area, easily spotted the flashing blue neon sign across the main street from the center. The sign was the only one blinking. It said BEER.

It was a small joint. There was a wide open, dim room with empty booths along two walls and scattered tables. The lone brilliance was to the detective's left, where a green pool table glistened under two low lamplights. Two shadowed men were eyeing polished balls on the table while chalking their canes.

Shayne went to the bar across the back wall, straddled a stool, pushed his hat back with a thumb. Two other bar cutomers sat hunched over beer bottles. Behind him three men sat at one of the tables. And there were the pool players. That was it. No other customers, little noise. The two men at the bar shot side glances at him but remained silent, the three at the table conversed in low tones and the two at the pool table were preoccupied with the setup for the next shot.

Shayne asked the slight, seedy man behind the bar, "Got cognac?"

"Beer."

"Glass," nodded the redhead. "This Art's place?"

The seedy man didn't move.

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His eyes narrowed. "Don't you bulls know that by now? Look, you been—"

"I'm not a cop," interrupted Shayne, "and all the sign outside says is *beer*. Are you Art?"

"I'm Art."

"Mike Shayne. Private eye. Can I have my beer?"

"Depends. You in here because of that thing last night, that gunning out on the street?"

"You got it, Art."

"A private eye interested in a nigger killing? Hell, man, don'tcha know those things happen all the time? Should be more of 'em. So one jig cuts down another, so what's the loss to the world?"

"Bert Jackson," said Shayne.

"Was a customer for a long time." The bartender nodded. "One of the five-to-seven crowd. That's when I get my heavy run. Hell, I don't remember when he started coming in. Was a long time ago. He was a nigger, yeah, but I served him. If I didn't the Feds would lay on me, yuh know?"

VIII

SHAYNE WAVED FOR the glass of beer, digested the knowledge that Flo Jackson's husband had been a black. He took a couple of swallows. With the third, he

briefly envisioned her father giving her away at the wedding. Cummings would have been ramrod stiff, stone, with no grimace allowed to show.

Corps training was imbedded deep. And it had carried over to opening the door of his home to the newlyweds. Or had the opening door been a tactical move designed to hide the couple, to get them inside, to close the door to the outside world?

The bartender volunteered, "You could near set your watch in here by that boy. He worked across the street. At Kelley's.

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Came in near every night, except Saturdays and Sundays. You could look up about ten after five any week night and he was coming in the door. He'd hang till 'bout seven, then go.

"You know he was married to a white girl? She's supposed to be a rich white girl, but I don't think he ever got a dime from her family. Not that he'd take it, I suppose. He had a streak in him—proud the bastard. What about, I dunno. Like he was black and damn proud of it, I guess. Of course he had the Feds on his side. Everybody knows that."

Shayne asked, "Was Jackson nervous in here last night? Did he act any differently than he normally did?"

"Hell, no. The cops asked me the same question, and I tell you like I told them: he came in around five-fifteen, hung his elbows right down there on the end of the bar, like he always did—he never sat—and he hung there jawing with anyone who would jaw with him. About seven he cut, like always. Next thing we heard was a helluva blast outside. We all ran out there, natch, and there he was—scattered all over the sidewalk, blood and stuff all over the place, his face gone."

"You didn't see the shooter?"

"Nothin', man. The street was like it always is—cars goin past and nobody walking. If there was someone walking, they'd already cut a fast trail. You know, nobody wants to get involved in a nigger shooting. It was just one black cuttin' down another. Who'd want to get involved?"

"You know a guy named Andy Weber?"

"Jesus, man, it's all over TV tonight! He got killed walkin' along the sidewalk, the TV said—kinda like the nigger-boy leavin' here last night. Just walkin' along and bang—bang. What do they call it? Assass . . . assass . . . Anyway, yeah, I knew the Weber kid. He lived around here someplace. And him and Jackson, they used to be pals and come in together.

"But that was back a spell, back when the Weber kid was workin' over there at Kelley's, too. Him and Jackson used to show every night together. I guess it was because they was workin' at the same store in those days. Anyway, they used to come in, bend elbows together, and then the Weber kid got this job downtown, Jackson said. He stopped comin' in regular. Oh, he'd show once in a while, buy a pack or so."

"Did he come in and buy a pack last night?"

"No."

"Peanuts Cross."

"Huh?"

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"A guy named Peanuts Cross was killed over on the Beach."

"Yeah—yeah, I know," the bartender said quickly. "I read about him in the papers. Last weekend. And, yeah, he used to come in here too. But that was a long time ago. Shayne, how come you're askin' me about these guys?"

"Because each has been murdered."

"But not here, man, not in my place. What do you think this is, a slaughterhouse or something? Hey, finish the beer and scramble. You're scary."

"How long since Peanuts Cross hung his elbows here, Art?"

"Come *on*! That was years ago. I ain't seen that dude in two, three years, maybe longer. It had to be seventy-three, maybe seventy-two, maybe a combination. And I'll tell you something, Shayne—I was glad to see him quit comin' in! He was a freeloader, bothered my other customers."

"Okay, so now I'll tell *you* something, Art—I've been told Cross, Jackson and Weber were pals."

The bartender shook his head. "Then you've been fed some bad info, Shayne. Jackson and Weber was friends, I guess you'd say. And Cross and Duke Page, they used to come in together sometimes."

"Page?" Mike Shayne asked it quietly.

"You know—Duke Page, the singer. The Duke of Song, they call him now—he's hot in the big clubs, the hotels in town these days. Well, Duke used to sip a beer here—right over there at that table. He used to come in late every afternoon, sit alone over there at that table, and then he sort of took up with Cross. I never understood why, except they seemed to get along. They talked a lot together.

"Finally Cross and Duke and Jackson and Weber—well, they seemed to drift together. I mean, Jackson and Weber, they was always standin' down there at the end of the bar and one day Duke waves them over to his table and they go, and from then on for a few weeks the four of them used to sit over there every evening, sipping suds. And I'll tell you something else—in all that time I don't recollect Peanuts Cross ever payin' for a round."

"What happened to this cozy foursome?"

"It wasn't cozy, Shayne. It was just two guys drinking beer here, two guys drinking beer there. But all four are here almost every afternoon, so they drift together. They lifted some glasses together for a couple, three weeks, then it ended.

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Cross, Duke and Weber quit coming in.

At the time, I thought it was kinda funny, all of them disappearing all of a sudden, but Jackson clued me—Duke got a job in a club on the other side of the city, Weber was moving downtown, and Cross . . . well, hell, I don't remember *what* Jackson told me about him. Like I said, I was glad to see him go."

"You know where Page is working these days?"

"Yeah, his picture is in the paper every day—in the ads. Hotel Dubose. That's getting right up there, ain't it—for a kid who a couple three years ago was a clerk in a record shop across the street?"

"Not bad," Shayne admitted, leaving the bar stool.

"You gonna be seeing Duke?" Shayne asked.

"If I can get to him before an assassin does."

"Huh?"

Shayne waved and walked out of the beer joint.

The redhead drew hard on his memory bank as he pointed the Buick downtown. In his telephone conversation with Andy Weber, the youth had associated himself with Cross and Jackson, then he had said something about "the four of us." Add Art's information about a singer named Duke Page and four guys seemed to have drifted together to form a beer-joint camaraderie.

Three of the four were now dead, slain one after another in recent days. Did it mean Duke Page was in big danger?

The Dubose was one of the older hotels in the city. Its exterior and lobby emanated solid foundations and quiet elegance. But its club had been tuned to the times. It was mod with flashing lights and stuffed with beards, expensive casual attire and noise.

A single singer was on stage when Shayne entered the club. He was making the noise, a medium-tall young man with a full mane of black hair and a polished goatee. He wore a spangled shirt open to a wide leather waist belt and tight-spangled trousers. His voice was deep and he moved around with ease on the stage, the hand mike a valued prop.

Shayne saw a waiter start toward him then curve off. In that instant he sensed the presence of someone behind him and slightly to his right. He looked over his shoulder at a neat square man.

"Shayne," said the man.

"Carl," said the detective. "On your toes?"

"Uh-huh. I get paid to be there. You got a special interest in the Dubose tonight or did

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you just drop in to catch our new boy up there?"

"You security boys sure are a suspicious bunch," said the redhead.

"Ain't we." Carl Yancy nodded. "Still, it's like the old days, sorta, when I was downtown in Will Gentry's stable. Be courteous, but suspicious. Same thing here."

"Is that Duke Page?"

"Yep. New, but hot, Mike. Look at the mob in here. It's been this way every night since he signed on. What's your interest in him? Got something to do with that business I read about in the papers, you and Painter?"

"Maybe. I need to powwow with him."

"Hmm." Carl Yancy pinched the end of his nose. "Your best bet, Mike, will be upstairs. Page has a suite here. It's part of his pay package. Another ten minutes or so, and he'll be going up, he's on the downhill pull of his show now. I'll go up with you. Page has a pair of shadows, supposed to be a couple of heavies, to keep the fans at a distance. One of them is backstage, the other will be upstairs, guarding the jewels or something. I'll introduce you."

"No rough stuff, Carl."

The house man gave the redhead a sharp look, then said, "Okay, I'd appreciate that, Mike. We like it quiet here. Come on—at least I can take you to the service elevator. It's quicker."

The suite was tucked away in a quiet corner. Shayne rapped on a door and a deep voice inside said, "Come on in."

He entered a large and open room. Modernistic furnishings were scattered about. A wide youth reading a newspaper glanced up, then pitched the paper aside and shot to his feet when he saw Shayne.

"*Hey*!" he rasped, "I thought you was the Joe bringing the beer."

He advanced threateningly. Shayne flashed his billfold ticket. The guy snatched the billfold, studied the ticket, then he snarled, "*Out!* You got the wrong house, shamus!"

Shayne spread fingers and thumped the kid's hard chest. He retrieved his billfold. "Cool it, Junior. I've got news for your master."

A flash of eyes and a twitch of shoulder telegraphed the kid's reaction. The blow was designed to be a sledgehammer chop to Shayne's solar plexus. But the redhead caught the wrist behind the large fist and yanked the young man forward. At the same time, he twisted slightly and shot a meaty shoulder into his face. The youth yelped and stepped back.

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Blood began to flow from his nostrils. Shayne gripped the young man's shoulders and propelled him backward.

"Carl Yancy said to keep things quiet, Junior—which is exactly what we're going to do. Go wash your beak. You're getting blood on the carpeting. I'll call you to sign the tab when the beer arrives."

IX

THE BODYGUARD STOOD hunched and unmoving for several seconds. His face was screwed down in anger and his eyes were pinpoints. But he saw something in Shayne that kept him from moving forward again.

He slapped a handkerchief against his bleeding nose and disappeared into a bedroom. He left the door behind him wide open. Shayne tipped his hat to the back of his head and lit a cigarette. Trailing smoke from his nostrils, he moved around the room, taking inventory. Most of the furnishings belonged to the suite, but he spotted a few personal items here and there.

He spotted a row of framed photographs on one wall and studied them critically. One was of Duke Page on stage, caught belting out a song. Another showed Page wearing a karate belt. In a third Page was standing beside a small airplane. The fourth had Page cradling a skeet gun. Then it was Page poised on the end of a pool diving board, Page sitting in a golf cart, Page leaning against a Mercedes Benz.

Something missing in the photos picked at the detective. Didn't Page have friends? Women, for instance. Surely a hot young singing star should attract girlfriends.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Shayne opened it to a waiter who wheeled in a deep silver cart packed with ice cubes. Under the ice were bottles of beer. The waiter turned and walked out without looking for a tip or producing a tab.

Mike Shayne was still standing by the cart when the young heavy re-entered the room. He had changed shirts and handkerchiefs. He continued to tap at his nose, but there was no blood. "Duke likes iced beer," he offered. "It's how he unwinds."

Duke Page and another solid looking young man entered the suite. They swept in and stopped short. Page's eyes darted from Shayne to the heavy opposite him. Crowsfeet appeared on a glistening brow. Beside him, the young man started to lift a hand.

"Don't," said Shayne.

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The young man became rooted, his hand halfway up. The other heavy took the handkerchief from his nose and snapped, "He's a private eye, Duke. He came in fast, surprised me. I was expecting the beer and—"

"Duke," Shayne interrupted, "tell your boys to vanish. We're going to converse about three dead men—Peanuts Cross, Bert Jackson and Andy Weber."

Duke Page stared hard for a few moments, then shuddered. "Holy Christ!" he breathed. He came to the ice cart, dug out a beer, twisted off the cap. He took a swig. "Like the man says, guys—fade."

They walked out of the suite, reluctantly. No one said a word until they were gone and the door was closed behind them. Then Duke Page drank half the beer from the bottle and waved it.

"I knew those fellows," he said, speaking rapidly. "A few years ago—three or four, I guess it's been now—I knew them. I was working in a record shop then, recording on my own here and there, trying to get a break. I met all three of them in a little beer joint around the Sea Breeze Shopping Center. I don't know if the joint is still there or not. I—"

"It's where Jackson got cut down," Shayne interrupted

bluntly. "He had just left Art's when he was shotgunned."

"Holy *Christ*!" Page finished the beer, dug out another bittle. "I read about it, but I didn't pay any attention, I guess. And Peanuts, he was over in Miami Beach? And Andy Weber was downtown. The three of them, killed—wild, man! Peanuts might figure . . . "

He drank beer, began to pace the thick carpeting. "Peanuts was an empty head, as I recall. He could get killed, I guess. He was the kind. But Jackson and Weber . . . hell, I don't even hardly remember them, but it seems to me they had a little something on the stick, they

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weren't the kind of dudes you'd figure to get knocked off."

"You haven't had any contact with them recently?" Shayne asked.

Page stopped pacing, looked surprised. "Me? *Why* would I? I mean, I'm here! They . . . " He waved the bottle, drank, resumed the pacing.

"Not even a phone call from one of them?"

"Nothing."

Shayne watched him pace for a few seconds, then snubbed out his cigarette. "I've been employed to investigate Weber's death. Nosing around tonight, your name came up. It was out at Art's place. Art remembers you, which would figure. A kid used to come into your place, drink beer with the boys, then the kid becomes a celebrity. A bartender would remember."

"I suppose," admitted Page. "But I haven't seen any of those cats in three, four years, like I said."

"Are you a loner, Duke?"

Page stopped pacing again. "I'm not sure I understand the question, Mr. Shayne."

The redhead waved to the wall pictures. "You seem to be a loner. You're alone in the photos—no companions, no women."

"Ahh!" Page drew himself up. "That's my life up there. My work and my interests. And there won't be any new photographs. Not for a while, at least. The companions, the women, will come later, perhaps. *After* I am established.

"You see, basically, I'm wary of people. I'm still on very thin ice as far as establishing a career. I'm just starting. And I don't need clutter at this point. Social friends would be just that, something that would take my mind from my work, might even endanger my career.

"What would happen to me, for instance, if I date a broad a few times and she becomes pregnant—not by me, but by a friend next door—and she starts throwing a paternity suit at me? That kind of thing could end my career right now. I'm not established enough yet to cope with that kind of situation. Do you understand what I mean?"

"You're running hot but cautious, all you're looking for is trump cards."

"In a nut, Mr. Shayne. The way I see it, I screw up now, get screwed up, there's no second chance. It was tough enough getting the first real break."

"You had any personal threats lately?

He looked astonished. *"Me?"*

"No anonymous phone calls. No mail? How about your two

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boys? Have they had any crank mail relating to you?"

Page shook his head. "If they had, I'd know about it."

Shayne used a thumb and forefinger to tug an earlobe. Then he said, "What bothers me, Duke, is the one, two three bit. Cross, Jackson and Weber killed—click, click, click. Well, it's my problem. See you around."

He rose to his feet, headed for the door.

"Mr. Shayne?"

He stopped, looked over his shoulder. Page stood unmoving; he looked indecisive. "Should I be—extra careful or anything?" He asked.

Shayne said, "You and three dead guys once were drinking companions at Art's beer joint. It's the only tie I have at the moment, Duke. Take it from there."

"But . . . " Page couldn't seem to find words. He threw an arm wide.

"Yeah," agreed Shayne, nodding, "I know, it's thin—*unless there's something else* that makes you four a package."

"No, no!" Page was pacing again. He drank from the beer bottle.

Mike Shayne rode the guest elevator down to the Dubose lobby. He was stopped by Carl Yancy, who got out of a deep leather chair.

"Okay up there?" Yancy asked.

"What kind of a kid *is* Page, Carl?"

"Straight, clean, quiet, the kind we like. No women, no grass, no horse, no booze. Beer after a show, that's it. We've never had another one like him."

"And he drives a Mercedes."

Yancy said, "You've been playing detective again, Mike."

X

BLACK CLOUDS SPEWED heavy rain on the city Wednesday morning. Outside police headquarters, Shayne yanked his hat low and splashed in on the run. He shook water from his hat and coat as he moved up to the detective squad room. He found Dave Byers alone at a desk in a corner. The veteran detective gave Shayne a crooked grin as he sat back in an ancient chair.

"I've been wondering when you'd show, Mike. I hear you have an interest in one of my ex-pimples."

"Cross could have gotten killed by anybody, Dave?"

"He was lucky to stay out of a grave as long as he did. He was a Dead Man's street operator. He wasn't above stiffing anybody and shall we say he worked the gutters and sew-

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ers? One exception, though. He had one brief stint in the sunlight. Worked from an apartment complex out in the Sea Breeze area. The Fairview. It's where I finally got him.

"There was a kid living in the complex, one of these 17-year-old hot-to-trots. A runaway with bread but no savvy about how to go to the well or pacing. Cross provided the men—for a fee, natch. I nabbed his tail, but it didn't stick. All of my witnesses crashed on me and then the kid's Mama and Papa showed with enough bread to pour cold water on everything. I went the only route I had left. I pointed Cross across the Causeway. The Civil Rights people wouldn't like *how* I pointed, but the hell with *them*. They ain't cops."

"This stint in the sunlight, Dave. That was out of character, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but so was pimping." Byers twirled a button on his coat. "I figure he got a mark for a bundle on a street corner and decided to step up in the world, go to apartment living and booking. With a telephone yet! But he runs into the hotsy, and he ain't worth a damn on the phone. Between the two he's back in his van and over on the Beach inside two months. Most guys who get out of their habitat go splunk on their butts—especially the Cross-breeds. That's a little joke, Mike."

"Un-huh," Shayne said. Then "All this time you were keeping tabs on Peanuts, Dave, you run across an Andrew Weber or Bert Jackson?"

Byers frowned. "Nope. But funny you should ask. Will Gentry asked me the same thing just about thirty minutes ago. Incidentally, Mike, he's got company upstairs. Peter Painter and Paul Wysuski. Watch out for Wysuski. He thinks like Painter. In his book, all private detectives belong in garbage heaps. I hear his pappa—a cop in Detroit—got killed by one."

Gentry, Painter and Wysuski were huddled when Mike Shayne entered Gentry's office. The police chief cut off words and looked up. The cigar butt in the corner of his mouth bobbed. Painter and Wysuski twisted in their chairs in front of the chief's desk.

"Nice of you to drop in, Mike," Gentry said after a moment. "I was about to send troops after you." His voice was flat. "We seem to have a messy little murder package on our hands and everywhere we go we run into you or your name. How come?"

"Young Jackson had a father-in-law, a Marine colonel,

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retired. Being an ex-Marine, he likes direct action. So he hired me."

There was an exchange of silent glances amongst the trio. Shayne knew his announcement was news.

Gentry pinned Wysuski with a stare. The detective lifted his shoulders. "All the Jackson girl told me was that Shayne had been to see her. She didn't say he had been hired by her father."

Gentry said, "Cards on the table, Mike."

"You still think I snapped Cross's neck, Petey?" Shayne countered.

Painter bristled, "How do you know cause of death was a—"

He shut off the words, glowered at Gentry.

Gentry sat back. His eyes were pinpoints and his teeth and lips were clamps on the cigar butt. "Gentlemen," he finally managed, "I am the police chief of Miami. I have two shotgun slayings in my city staring me in the face. The shotguns were—or the shotgun was twice—fired on city streets.

"Innocent citizens can get hurt. That makes innocent citizens begin to get nervous. In addition, I have a press corps making loud noises. Frosting? I have superiors who are beginning to make phone calls. Nothing nasty yet, gentlemen, but

my phone has been ringing this morning. *Now . . .*"

He swelled suddenly and came forward in the chair, slammed forearms on his desk. *"Goddammit!"* he cried. "Each of you is going to put what you have on this desk and we're going to piece it together and come up with some answers!"

But there were no answers. Painter was floundering. He had Peanuts Cross's death in the back of a Volks van—period. No progress in his investigation of that death. No witnesses, of course. Worse, no

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one who would admit Peanuts Cross even existed. It was as if Cross and the van had been whisked in from outer space and put down in Miami Beach just to jangle Peter Painter's nerve ends.

Except Mike Shayne had been on the scene. Mike Shayne had—

"Wysuski?" Gentry interrupted Painter's accusation coldly.

The police detective had been assigned the Jackson slaying. He had been getting nowhere when Weber was gunned down. Because of the similarity in the killings, he had been told to take a look at the Weber killing, too. Then he had found a tie—a one-time Jackson-Weber friendship—and he was now looking at the two murders as a package.

Cross had entered the picture when Wysuski went to Art's beer joint to talk to Art. Art had given him Cross. Cross had brought in Painter and Mike Shayne—Shayne because he had discovered Cross' body and had appeared at the Weber house and later had gone to the Jackson trailer.

"Mike?" Gentry said, demanding.

The redhead threw in Duke Page. The singer, obviously, was a surprise to the police. They shot triangular glances, then stared at Shayne, waiting.

Shayne lifted his shoulders. "Duke is a beer drinker. There was a time when he was a clerk in a record shop in Sea Breeze. He used to hit Art's place and was acquainted with Cross, Weber and Jackson. Art didn't mention Page to you, Wysuski?"

The young detective swiped at his nose with the back of his hand, adjusted his glasses. "Yeah. Now that you mention the name, Shayne, I remember it. But what the hell—over the years lots of guys have sipped in that joint. And Page is in an entirely different league. What would a big-time singer have in common with—"

"He hasn't always been big time," Shayne interrupted. "According to him, he's just getting off the ground. Three years, ago he drank beer with Cross, Weber and Jackson."

Wysuski became defiant. "But they're *dead*! And Page *isn't*!"

"Question—is he a candidate for a grave?"

The three policemen stared hard again but remained silent. Shayne finally lit a cigarette. "The way I see it, we need something solid to make the killings a One-Little-Indian thing. If we come up with that tie, then Page might damn well be the fourth Indian."

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Painter said sourly, "As usual, Shayne, you're blowing things up out of every sort of proportion."

Will Gentry added with a scowl, "At the moment, I can't buy your speculation about Duke Page either, Mike. Not solely on the basis that he used to drink beer with our three victims. Of course, if you're holding out on us, if you've got some other little nugget that will—"

Shayne cut off the chief's words with a shake of his head. He leaned forward, flicked cigarette ashes into a tray. "No nuggets," he said, snapping off the words. "Speculation—I assumed it was allowed."

He stood up, added, "And I also assume you've checked out Weber at work and at play. No missing funds at the advertising agency, for instance? No enemies over there? How about women?"

Wysuski put in, "He was a straight down-the-road liver, Shayne. He was making decent bread."

"But had some out-of-the-ordinary medical expenses, I hear."

Wysuski looked surprised. "Well, yeah. One of his kids has a heart problem. It involved surgery. But he's been paying on a regular basis, no misses. I figure it's part of the reason he was a clean liver. Nothing left for extras."

"You got something crawling around in the back of your skull, Mike?" Gentry asked suspiciously.

The redhead tugged an earlobe with thumb and forefinger. "Maybe," he said thoughtfully. Then he added, "But you guys don't like speculation, do you?"

No one said a word as he strode out of the office.

The bungalow on Circle Drive looked quiet and drab when Shayne arrived. The gloom was heavy inside the house, too. Betty Weber stood with a hand on the doorknob and her head cocked, blocking entry. Her face was puffed, the eyes pink-rimmed.

She said, "I don't think Mr. Wysuski wants me to talk to you, Mr. Shayne."

"Why did your husband telephone me, Mrs. Weber?" he asked bluntly.

She jerked and stared up at him. Then she turned back into the house, allowing him to enter.

She went to the colorful couch and sat on its edge. Her fingers became interlocked in her lap and worked. Finally she said, "The neighbors have taken the kids. I'm supposed to be resting. My parents are flying in from Alaska this afternoon. My father works on

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the pipeline up there. He—"

"The phone call, Mrs. Weber," Shayne pressed.

She continued to stare off into space.

"Your husband was acquainted with Peanuts Cross and Bert Jackson," he said.

"Yes."

Drawing on his patience, the redhead continued, "Mrs. Weber, I have been hired to find the person who killed Bert Jackson. At the moment, I have a strong suspicion that, when I find this person, I'll discover who killed your husband. Now, your husband sounded upset when he phoned me. Had he been threatened?"

She looked up abruptly, her eyes round and unblinking. "No," she said, just above a whisper. She chewed her lower lip a few moments, then seemed to make a decision. "It was the money," she said. "That damned bag of money!"

Approximately three years earlier, Andy Weber had come home from work one evening carrying an airlines handbag he said he had found in the parking lot at Sea Breeze Shopping Center. Inside the bag was $2,240 in cash, all in bills.

She and Andy had been thunderstruck. Neither had ever seen that much cash in one lump. They had been at a loss as to what to do about the find. They had spent an entire night at the kitchen table, counting, recounting, speculating, theorizing, rationalizing.

Finally, they had decided to sit tight on the bag and watch the classified ads section of the newspapers. Someone, surely, would advertise the loss of the bag, offer a reward for its return. The Webers could use the reward money—they had just become subject to a huge medical bill.

But no ad appeared in the papers and again it became decision time. The Webers could put an ad about the find in the papers. They could turn the bag in at the main office of the shopping center. They could go to the police. Or they could keep the bag, say nothing to anyone, ever—finders, keepers.

They had plunked $2,000 in cash down on a combination hospital-doctor bill and sealed their lips with invisible tape. They wouldn't even talk about the money between themselves—a vow occasionally broken. But something unforseen happened to each of them. Guilt set in, became a weight. In a sense, they felt as if they were thieves.

"Andy—wanted to talk to you about the money," Mrs. Weber finished, her voice breaking. She bit her lower lip and the

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crowsfeet between her brows were deep as she shook her head. "I don't know why. I mean, after three years and nothing, why all of a sudden should he want to tell a private detective he doesn't even know about a bag of money he once found in a parking lot. It didn't make sense.

"But he seemed to think it was important. Monday night Bert Jackson was killed—we heard about it on the TV news—Andy suddenly became obsessed with telling someone about the money. He mentioned you. I couldn't believe it, but I couldn't stop him either. I still don't understand why he thought he had to tell, Mr. Shayne."

"Did you discuss this with Detective Wysuski? Shayne asked.

She shook her head. "Why would I?"

Shayne paused in thought. Then he went down a different path. "Are you aware of any contact your husband might have had recently with either Peanuts Cross or Bert Jackson? Maybe a phone call, maybe a telegram, maybe—"

"No," she cut in. "I didn't know Cross. And Andy and Bert—well, they haven't been close in the last two or three years."

"Did Andy gamble? Football, maybe. Basketball? I don't mean big, Mrs. Weber. But let's say he—"

"Since the day of our marriage, Mr. Shayne, I've taken care of the finances in our lives. I've made the bank deposits, paid the bills. My husband did not gamble. Why would you ask?"

"Because Peanuts Cross was a two-bit gambler and your husband once was acquainted with him in their beer-drinking days at Art's."

"Oh? Well, I don't recall ever hearing the name. At least, not until the other night, Saturday night, when this Cross person was killed. Andy got excited, but—"

"How about Duke Page?" Shayne interrupted. "Andy ever talk about him?"

She looked surprised. "Occasionally. I mean, Andy knew him once."

"When, he, too, used to hang out at Art's. The four of them—your husband, Jackson, Cross and Duke Page—were acquainted in those days, Mrs. Weber."

She shrugged, looked puzzled. "All right," she said simply.

Shayne took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said, "that's where it seems to end—they were once acquainted, just four guys who used to drink beer together occasionally, but who with time

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went separate ways. Okay, Mrs. Weber, I'll keep in touch."

As he was heading for the front door, she asked, "Mr. Shayne, do you really think you'll find the person who killed Andy?"

"Yes," he said, stopping and looking at her over his shoulder.

Tears were rolling from her eyes, but he knew she didn't realize she was crying. "When you do," she said, "will you ask him why he killed my husband?"

Shayne walked through the drizzle to the Buick. His frown was deep. A bag of money troubled him. Damned odd someone would be carrying a couple of thousand dollars in cash in an airlines handbag . . . and, after losing the bag, why not seek its return?

Or had there been jeopardy in advertising?

XI

ART'S BEER JOINT was void of customers when Shayne entered and slapped rainwater from his hat. Art popped up from behind the bar. He was lugging a trash can. When he saw the detective, he put down the can and groaned. *"No!"*

"Memory-picking time again, Art. Weber, Jackson, Cross and Page, that was roughly three years ago. And then they sort of split, no coming in anymore. Okay, think hard about this one. *When* did the foursome break up? I'm trying to pinpoint the month."

The bartender frowned heavily. "Man, if I could remember when every guy I ever knew stopped coming in to my place, I'd . . . Hey, I remember *this* much! It was right after the Super Bowl!"

"Of seventy-three?"

"Yeah. I remember because of Cross. He was putting on a big show, making like he had a fortune riding on that game, but hell, we all knew he'd probably bet a ten-spot, maybe only a fiver. I never did hear how he came out, but it was shortly after that, maybe a couple of weeks, maybe six, those four broke up. I can't get no closer, Shayne."

"And that's also about the time Weber went to work downtown, Page turned singer and Cross disappeared, right?"

Art's frown deepend for a few seconds, then he grinned. "Hey, pretty sharp! It all happened just about then."

"Cross was living in the Fairview Apartments then?"

"Damn, I don't remember that for sure, Red. But it was about that time. How'd you know about him living over there?"

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"Where's the Fairview, Art?"

"Block down the street to the north, two over to the east."

"Was Duke Page living there at the time?"

"Sure—with his sister. He never lived no other place I know of. That was before he became The Duke of Song, of course. He ain't been back since, I don't think. Duke and his sister didn't hit it on all cylinders. Duke used to sit in here and bitch about her. Still, he was padding at her place."

"And he got Cross an apartment at the Fairview?" The redhead asked.

"Hell, I wouldn't know. He could have, I suppose. Duke and Cross were pretty buddy-buddy in those days. I never figured why. Duke had class 'bout him, even when he was selling records across the street. But Cross—man, he was wormy. I never figured he was packed too tight inside the skull, yuh know? Why them two clicked, I can't tell you today."

"Then add Jackson and Weber and you really get a strange combination of personalities, right?"

"I ain't sure I know what you mean, Shayne, but if you're saying it takes a hurricane or some crazy thing like a war to mix them kind of dudes, then you're tracking right."

"Hurricane, war—or maybe a plot," said the redhead.

"Huh?"

Shayne waved a hand. "Just an idle thought. Duke's sister still living at the Fairview?"

"How would I know?"

"And I don't suppose you'd know her name either."

"*That* I remember. Sara. I heard Duke bitching about her often enough."

"How come he didn't like her?"

"I dunno. He kept calling her a dyke. Maybe that was it, I dunno."

Sara Page was a plain fine-boned woman of thirty-five or so who blocked Shayne's entry into her apartment with a slender body and a confident air. But she was also curious about a private detective who wanted to talk to her about her brother.

She came outside then gently closed the door behind her. "We can talk out here, Mr. Shayne," she said in a pleasant tone. "I have company."

They were on a roofed second floor balcony that ran the length of the apartment complex wing and overlooked a blue-watered swimming pool, out of the rain. Sara Page put slim buttocks against the wrought-iron balcony railing and crossed arms on her chest. She was casually dressed in a

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black pantsuit and she looked freshly bathed. She regarded the redhead with slightly cocked eyebrows and just a touch of a smile toying with the corners of unpainted lips.

"Excuse me for not inviting you inside," she said, "but my friend has not yet dressed. She spent the night with me. We've been having coffee, talking. Woman like to talk, you know. I realize it is already past noon, but my sleep and active periods of the twenty-four hour cycle differ from the conventional.

"You, Mr. Shayne, are looking at a nurse who works nights. Now, what is it you want to know about my brother? Don't tell me someone finally is challenging him. Has he hoodwinked someone who is fighting back?"

"Your brother hoodwinks Miss Page?"

"Mr. Shayne!" It was an admonishment with a soft laugh that lacked humor. "My brother will steal the stripes from a tiger. I think he'd do anything for a buck. I know, you hear the expression, 'He'd steal the eyeballs from his own mother'. Well, that one applies to my brother, too. He didn't steal her eyeballs before she died, but he cleaned out her checking and savings accounts—and at the same time had the guts to sit across a dining room table from her right here in this apartment."

"You kicked him out."

"About two years and four thousand dollars too late!"

"It's tough, I know," said Shayne, "but you could have filed charges."

"Have you ever been a mother, Mr. Shayne?" Sara Page countered. Then she asked, "Just what *is* your interest in Duke? Or are you working for him?"

"Three years ago or so," he said, "your brother was selling records in a shop in Sea Breeze—then he became a singer who seems to have caught on. That's quite a transition. Not unlikely, but it must have been a time of decision. There must have come the moment when he had to weigh a steady income, meager perhaps, against a chancy big income. And it had to be a period when he would be free—timewise—to pursue the big buck. But a dude still has to eat in a period of transition. He has to have a few bucks or free meals."

"Oh, Duke had the free meals," she nodded. "Then mother died. Almost immediately after the funeral I pointed him down the road. How he has survived since doesn't interest me. And you didn't answer me. What is your interest in him?"

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Shayne continued to ignore her curiosity. "Duke wasn't working, but he lived okay?"

"He had a friend who had moved in here, someone named Peanuts, I met him once—he was a creepy man. Duke moved in with him for a couple of weeks, then left. Duke must have had someone on the string—it'd be a woman, naturally, a widow, a divorcée, someone who could afford him—but he left, and I heard later he had moved into a fancy apartment. I don't know, I never bothered to look. Anyway, it was a good thing for him, I suppose, that he shipped out. Peanuts got busted. For pimping yet, we heard!"

"Sara?"

The summons came from the other side of the closed apartment door. It was a plaintive sound. Sara Page pushed from the balcony railing. She smiled suddenly, a genuine smile. "My friend, Mr. Shayne, is new. She finalized a divorce about two weeks ago; she's had a traumatic experience."

Shayne delayed her retreat. "Do you remember when it was that your brother moved out, Miss Page?"

She looked puzzled—and curious. She said, "I'll never forget, Mr. Shayne. It was January twenty-third, 1973. Three and three. Three has been my lucky number ever since."

XII

SHAYNE MUSED OVER the two-sided picture of Duke Page as he drove through the drizzle toward police headquarters. On the one side, he had a young man beginning to make it big, but a young man who seemed to live quietly, cleanly, a young man who was making an effort not to become emblazoned in sensational headlines, a young man who had built a shell, was avoiding people and entanglements.

On the other side, he had a young man painted selfish, greedy—and a thief. A young man who, according to a sister, was a parasite, would live off women, would turn any trick for money and success.

Shayne shook his head. Page might or might not be ripe as a target. It would depend on which side of the picture someone was pondering, he decided.

And when he attempted to link Page, Cross, Jackson and Weber in death, all he seemed to have was four strings—knotted on one end by a long past association—but the other ends far apart and free floating.

Unless, of course, he was zeroing in from the wrong side of the package.

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He spent a long and tedious afternoon in Records Division at police headquarters, chain-smoking and yanking his ear-lobe while sniffing dust from old files and skip-reading. He finally selected three unsolved cases and read the investigative history of each several times. Then he narrowed his sights to one case and pondered it from every angle he could imagine. The case could fit—it didn't have to fit. One of the investigative officers had been Carl Yancy.

Shayne left headquarters with a scowl mirroring inner speculation and concern. At the Dubose, he found the lobby crowded with women. A large sign just inside the revolving street door told him the hotel was hosting a convention of dental assistants. He moved through the women toward the elevator bank and stopped short.

Alvert Cummings emerged from an elevator. He was moving fast. He looked angry. Shayne intercepted him. "Colonel?"

"Shayne!" Cummings seemed startled. Then he said, "I see you have heard about him, too!"

"Duke Page?"

"My daughter told me about him today. This Page and Bert once knew each other."

"So?"

"He could know something about Bert, something that would tell us why Bert was shot down on a street. There has to be a reason for the killing, Shayne. And if you add Andrew Weber's death—"

"Colonel," Shayne interrupted coldly, "why did you hire me?"

Cummings squared his shoulders. "I want this business settled fast. I want my daughter home. I want Bert Jackson behind her. I want—"

"Action," said Shayne. "It's how you lived in the Corps. Black and white. Everything click-click. Tell me this, Colonel, just what the hell makes the Corps click-click?"

"Training, discipline, logic."

"And skills? You need a map reader, you call up an expert? You need a demolition man, you call up an expert? You need—"

"Yes."

"So I'm the expert in investigative work. Now, how about you sitting at home like a good Colonel and waiting for reports?"

Cummings swelled, his eyes hard, his cheeks flushed. But he seemed briefly at a loss for words and Shayne asked, "You talk to Page?"

"No. He supposedly isn't in!"

"Probably just as well," the redhead nodded. "I doubt that

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he'd tell you anything anyway."

"Oh, he'd talk, Shayne," Cummings said harshly. "I can be damned persuasive if I'm forced."

"That right?" Shayne cocked an eyebrow as a fresh avenue of speculation opened up inside his skull. "You know Page has a pair of bodyguards?" he asked.

"If that's what those two punks upstairs are, I do now. Not that they'd stop me. I still can handle myself."

"Uh-huh," Shayne nodded. The new speculation was growing, triggering a myriad of possibles. He needed time to sift pieces, do some fitting. "You going home from here?"

Cummings almost frowned. "Yes."

"Stick there," said the redhead. "I'll give you a call in an hour. I may have something for you. I have to think about it."

"Think about what?" Cummings demanded.

Shayne squared his jaw. "An hour and you'll know, Colonel."

He turned away from Cummings. He had spotted Carl Yancy buying a package of gum at a glass counter. He went to the glass, paid no particular attention to the house detective and ordered a package of cigarettes from a painted blonde.

"Is he still there?" Shayne asked out of the side of his mouth.

Yancy popped a stick of gum into his mouth. "He watched you all the way over here, but he's moving now. He looks unhappy and angry. Who is he?"

"My client."

"Ah!"

Shayne glanced across the lobby. Cummings was gone. The redhead fixed eyes on Yancy. "You sound as if someone flicked a light switch for you, Carl."

"The guy came in, asked for Duke Page at the desk. He was told Page wasn't in, but he went up anyway. I was tipped because your man acted as if he had a large chip on his shoulder. I went up from another direction, but Duke's boys had stopped him, finally convinced him to go away."

"Is Page upstairs?"

"Probably. Both of his boys are there. I saw them."

"Probably?"

Yancy shrugged. "Duke seldom leaves without one of them at his side or tagging along somewhere behind him. Occasionally he'll slide down incognito in the service elevator and out via the basement. But it doesn't happen often."

"When he makes these lone sorties, any idea where he goes?"

Yancy looked mildly sur-

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prised. "I'm not the guy's social secretary, Mike. Maybe he has a chick out there in the wide world somewhere. He doesn't have any here, that much I know. But he's male. He could have an occasional amorous yearning."

"I've been told he's aware there are women," Shayne said.

"I would assume he is," Yancy replied.

"No trouble upstairs this afternoon?" Shayne continued. "Everything quiet?"

"Yeah." Yancy frowned suddenly.

"And when Page makes these occasional loner excursions, he wheels away in the Mercedes?"

"Sometimes, sometimes not. His boys have a sedan, not near as flashy. Sometimes Duke will take it."

"Ford? Green?"

"Naw. Buick, blue. Mike, level with me."

Shayne waved a hand. "Catch me in the bar in about an hour. Maybe I'll be able to give you something. Right now, I've got to do some tall thinking."

Yancy popped another stick of gum into his mouth. "I know you're a loner, Mike, like to do your own thinking, but I've got a quiet, two-by-four office, desk, three chairs and a filing cabinet, I can order a bottle of cognac from the bar, and sometimes a sounding board will produce a hidden gem. Know what I mean?"

Shayne stared hard at the hotel detective.

"It's something I learned from Will Gentry in the old days," Yancy added with a shrug.

Yancy listened, chewed gum, remained stone-faced, offered nothing in the next forty minutes. Shayne paced the confines of the small office, trailing cigarette smoke behind him as he talked.

"Three-way street from here, Mike," Yancy said finally. He was frowning now, the ripples across his brow deep. "On one, you have a vague motive for three killings—and it's *damned* vague at this point. On another, the motive isn't visible. Then there's the third—you're offbase on the first two possibles. You haven't even come close to the killer or motive."

"Some sounding board!" grumbled Shayne. "Use your phone?"

"Sure."

He called Duke Page's suite, got one of the heavies on the line. Page wasn't in. Shayne said, "When he returns, tell him I've got the answer to the murders, and that I want to see him at Art's beer joint at seven-thirty tonight. He knows where the joint is."

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Shayne put the phone together. Yancy stared at him, remained silent. Shayne got an outside line, dialed the Cummings' residence. He told Cummings, "Got some answers, Colonel. I'll be at Art's beer joint at seven-thirty tonight, if you want them." He cut the connection without waiting for questions or comments.

Yancy breathed, "Holy Christ, Mike, what are you doing? You gone off your rocker?"

"There's a helluva good chance I'll get myself a killer, Carl," Shayne said, "or eliminate potentials."

Yancy looked stunned. "Duke Page? Or this—this Cummings?"

"Or maybe one of Page's heavies, a protective soul."

Yancy considered it, then mumbled, "Shayne, the target, huh?"

XIII

ART HAD SEVEN customers, none of them communicative. Shayne nursed a glass of beer, keeping one eye cocked toward the filmy back-bar mirror. He had a good view of the reflected street door.

Art moved nervously back and forth behind the bar, picking up here, putting there, wiping this, rinsing that, occasionally drawing another glass of suds on summons. He had displayed surprise at Shayne's entry, had become immediately wary when the detective straddled a stool, then cautiously curious, finally jumpy when he didn't get answers to his questions.

Mike Shayne lifted an eye to the beer-sign clock high behind the bar. Seven twenty-five. He shifted on the stool, casually dropped his right hand from the edge of the bar. The hand was at the opening of his coat, the fingers just inches from flashing inside and whisking out his .45. Keeping an eye in the mirror, he lifted the beer glass with his left hand and drained it.

The street door opened.

Cummings stepped inside. He loomed as he glanced around. Cummings looked as if he had arrived at a funeral. He was grim faced, his lips tight. But he wasn't carrying a shotgun—not even broken down and concealed under a raincoat.

Shayne sat tense as Cummings moved toward him. He kept his hand near the .45. Peanuts Cross had died of a broken neck. Cummings, once a Marine, probably had been schooled thoroughly in hand-to-hand combat.

Cummings then exploded, "Shayne, what *is* this? What's going *on*? I don't understand—"

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"Have a beer." Shayne said.

"I don't drink! Shayne, what—"

The redhead spun on his stool, cutting off the words. He looked Cummings square in the eye.

Cummings swelled. "You said you would have some answers!"

The redhead nodded. "And it's time to find out, isn't it?"

Cummings looked totally perplexed.

Shayne stood. "Art," he said without looking over his shoulder, "get this man a glass of water."

He went to the street door and outside, stood for a few seconds, his eyes sweeping parked cars. There were three sedans, spaced far apart. One was a new Granada.

He went into a flat racing dive and smacked the sidewalk just as the blast of the shotgun filled his ears. He rolled toward the curbing, yanking the .45 from its rig. He pitched himself into the roll, flopping all the way out to a sedan. The motor of the sedan had come alive. He leaped to his feet and went into another dive, going through the open window of the car.

He clawed at the leg and arm of the driver. He managed to yank a foot from the accelerator, and then there was a thump and the sedan was stopped.

Shayne clawed upward. His spine was arched the wrong way and his feet flailed, useless, outside the window. He dug in with his fingers and yanked his body through.

The driver of the sedan managed to drive an elbow up against Shayne's exposed jaw. The detective's lower teeth came up, caught his tongue. Pain splashed through his skull.

He clawed viciously, hooked his left arm around a neck and pulled himself inside the car. He managed to get up on his knees. An elbow went deep into his middle. He grunted and became briefly concave.

Then, with a fresh surge of strength, he went up on his knees again and hooked the head tight against his chest. A large hat flopped from the driver's head, disappeared over the back of the front seat. Shayne jammed the muzzle of the .45 under the jaw of the man and growled, "You're finished, Duke."

"Shayne!"

The rasp came from behind the detective. He almost triggered a shot into Duke Page's head. He twisted and stared at Carl Yancy.

"I had an eye out for him," Yancy said, sucking for air. He sounded as if he had just finished a mile run. "After your

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phone call this afternoon—aw, the *hell* with that! I had an eye out! I trailed him to a rental agency where he picked up this car!"

Shayne pushed the .45 tighter against Duke Page's lower jaw. "Three years ago, the four of you—just four guys drinking beer in a joint a couple of hours every afternoon—got your skulls together. You each needed money for one reason or another—Cross simply because he liked loot, you to live on while you tried to make it big, Weber to pay for surgery, Jackson to get him out from under his in-laws.

"You four hit a branch bank. Four amateurs, four nervous guys. You didn't hit the branch in Sea Breeze Shopping Center, but you got one that belongs to the same main bank downtown. You got around ten grand, enough for two-plus for each of you.

"I've been through the unsolved files at police headquarters, Duke! Tell me I'm wrong!"

The singer squirmed, struggled for breath.

"You each came into some bread at about the same time," continued Shayne. "And then came the split. Pull one caper and split. Don't have anything to do with each other after that caper, remain apart. That's smart. Except . . . "

Shayne let it hang on purpose. Duke Page struggled inside his hooked arm.

"Which one of them decided to lay it on you?" Shayne growled. "You were making it big and somebody in that little operation of three years ago decided to lay it on you. Blackmail, extortion—I'll guess Cross."

"The bastard!" Duke Page managed to growl.

"He lays, you kill," Shayne nodded. "You meet him in his van, he puts on pressure. And then you supply some of your own. Karate and a knife. Knife first, then karate. I saw the photos on the wall. You and a belt—you and a skeet gun.

"But Jackson and Weber. . . ?" Again Shayne let the words hang.

Duke Page remained silent. He was taut inside the detective's hooked arm, breathing harshly.

"So I'll guess," said Shayne. "Your career was everything. Nothing was to stop you, smear you. But Cross leaned. And after Cross, you started to think about the other two involved in your little caper. Maybe someday they'd lean too. The thought frightened you. You panicked, went after them."

Duke Page suddenly struggled inside the detective's arm.

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"I don't have to tell you anything, Shayne!" he bleated.

"But I know a guy you're going to tell," Shayne said grimly. "His name is Will Gentry."

Shayne yanked Page out of the car, forced him to spread against it. He frisked Page—nothing! The shotgun was on the front seat.

Behind the detective, Carl Yancy was attempting to placate Cummings, who gasped, "*Me?* Shayne suspected *I* might be a killer? That's why he got me here?"

"He had the crazy idea," Yancy said patiently, "that if he told the killer he had solved the case, the killer would go for him."

"Oh, God," groaned Cummings. "*Why* would I kill?"

"Dislike for your son-in-law. Maybe because he was black, maybe because he was simply a young man who took your daughter out of your home. You didn't like that young man *or* his friends."

"My God, that's *weak*!" cried Cummings.

"I know," said Yancy. "And so did Shayne. He really wasn't buying that for motive, friend. But he figured if you came gunning for him, you would have a real reason, something he'd have to get out of you."

Cummings said nothing as Shayne turned Duke Page down the sidewalk toward the Buick. He shot Carl Yancy a look. "You weren't exactly walking on clear water, either, pal," he said out of the side of his mouth. "That's one of *your* cases in the unsolved file."

"Oh, *Christ!*" breathed Yancy. "No wonder you laid it all out for me. I thought it was damned odd, but you were baiting me, Shayne!"

"It's how you catch fish, Yancy. You use bait."

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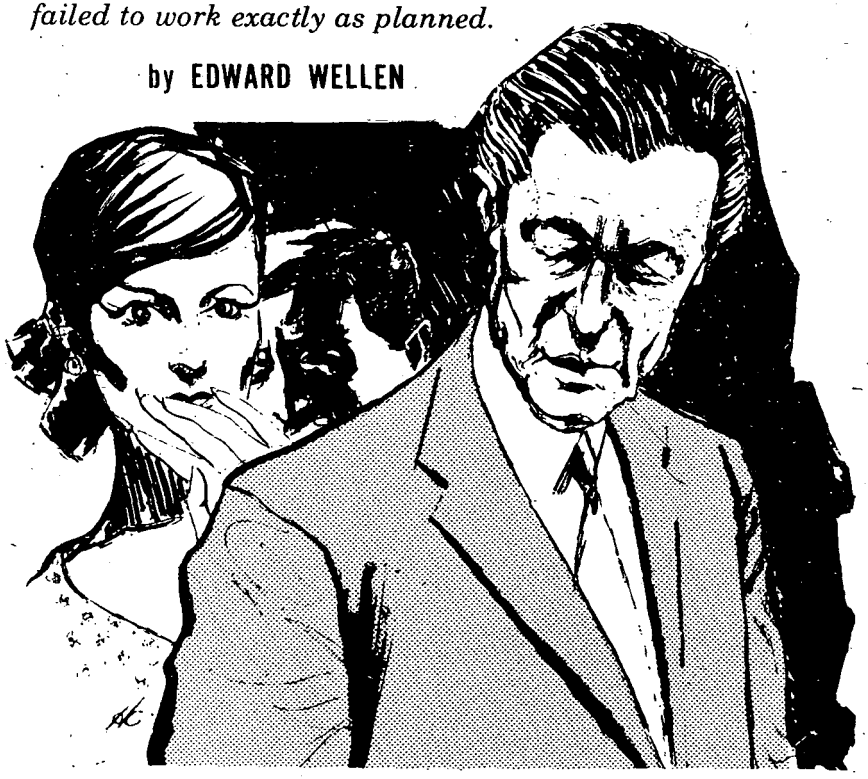
BANNERMAN COLLECTION

Lloyd planned a surprise for his bride's wealthy uncle—but things failed to work exactly as planned.

by EDWARD WELLEN



THE HONEYMOON STOOD only in its first quarter when Lloyd Pollard found himself short of funds. He had sunk all of his ready cash into, and staked all of his available credit upon, putting up the front that had enabled him to meet and marry an heiress. He turned confidently to his bride, Natalie Bannerman Pollard.

On the flower-framed terrace of their bridal suite overlooking the moonlit sea, after having refilled Natalie's champagne glass for the third time, Lloyd

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conveyed to her his temporary embarrassment.

It was Natalie who blushed. She tried to cover her face and smother her giggles. Fear pierced his brain. Was she trying to tell him she had no money of her own?

Impossible! He had run a thorough credit check on Natalie Bannerman. Natalie Bannerman had come into millions. And—unless he had married a ringer—he had a right to share in those millions. He bore with her bubbly giggling and relaxed. There was plenty of hope. She was only trying to tell him she did not yet have full control of her fortune.

"It's—*hic*—Uncle—(*giggle*)—Roland. *Hic*—I mean *hee-hee*—handles my allowance."

Lloyd looked at his wristwatch. The time differential between Hawaii and New England meant that Roland Bannerman would at this romantic moment be touching his napkin to his thin lips after putting away a Spartan breakfast. It would be better to catch him now at home than later in the all-too-businesslike surroundings of his office. Lloyd wasted no time.

He phoned room service, ordered lots of black coffee, grandly initialed the tab and the waiter's tip, and ungiggled his bride. He handed her the phone and told her what to say.

Lloyd and Natalie leaned cheek-to-cheek so Lloyd could hear Uncle Roland too. In that loving pose the first thing Lloyd heard was Uncle Roland's grudging acceptance of the collect-call charges. Lloyd turned his head slightly to press an encouraging kiss on Natalie's chin. She had a lot of chin.

Uncle Roland came through Loud, clear and triumphant. "Wouldn't heed my warning, would you? Had to elope with that fortune-hunter, didn't you? Know better now. Realize I was right. Want to come home and cry on my shoulder, I suppose."

Natalie's chin quivered, then firmed. "No, Uncle Roland. You were wrong then and you're wrong now. The marriage is fine. All I ever dreamed it would be." She smiled as Lloyd rewarded her with a squeeze. She made her voice earnest and urgent. "Uncle Roland, I simply must have a larger allowance beginning at once. I have a wider world to fit into now."

The ghosts of other conversations sounded on the line in the moment of silence that followed. Then Uncle Roland's rusty but lively chuckle sent them back to non-existence.

"What you mean, my dear Natalie, is that Pollard's broke."

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She flushed. "It's just a temporary embarrassment."

The chuckle again. "I know these temporary embarrassments. More often than not, the red ink proves to be permanent."

Lloyd did not have to prompt her. She poured forth on her own.

"Please leave Lloyd out of this, Uncle Roland. I'm only asking you to give me what's mine."

"What's mine, my dear, is the grave responsibility your parents, rest their souls, laid on me. I have to see to it that you don't waste your substance. And I will see to it as long as the burden remains mine. My hope is that by the time you reach thirty and come into control of your inheritance, you'll also have come to your senses. Speaking of time, I really should be on my way to the office. If there's nothing else on your mind—"

"But Uncle Roland—"

"Now, Natalie. I trust you're still a Bannerman at heart. If so, I know you won't go on in this vein. It embarrasses me to hear anyone beg. To say nothing of a Bannerman."

Lloyd felt Natalie's face turn to stone. "I won't embarrass you, Uncle—or myself."

"Good girl!"

"I will only say one last time that I wish you would reconsider. I feel you're being terribly unfair."

Another ghost-filled silence. Then Roland's cold tone matched Natalie's

"Since you put it that way, Natalie, I *will* reconsider. As it stands now, you have asked me to increase your allowance on the ground that you have taken a mate. I have refused to grant an increase, though fully intending to maintain you at the level you have been accustomed to. Now that I reconsider, it strikes me that it is the husband's duty to support the wife. Therefore, I will *decrease* your allowance by half."

Lloyd and Natalie stiffened together. Natalie's face crumbled. "Uncle—"

"Let me finish. If your devoted life partner isn't right there beside you taking this in I have no doubt he will quickly learn of his bad bargain. And you'll soon see for yourself whether or not the man is a fortune-hunter, incapable of making a living for himself, much less for a wife as well.

"At that point, my dear, should you wish to seek an annulment and want my blessing, I promise to give it freely. Just wire me collect. Meanwhile, it would be well if you were to do some reconsidering of your own."

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Click. The line went dead.

Lloyd made up his mind fast. He disconnected himself from Natalie even before she had stirred herself to hang up the ghost-voiced phone.

He had gambled and lost. He knew enough to cut his losses and walk away. But he was not a good loser. And Natalie was at hand to take his pique out on.

As she drew herself near him again and eyed him with a frightened wildness she tried to cover with a laugh, he took hold of her to shove her away. Her sudden fierceness made him stop.

"We'll *show* Uncle Roland, won't we, darling? Once I'm thirty, he'll have nothing to say about what I do with my money. It's only ten years. They can be marvelous years, can't they?"

He shoved her away, but more gently than he had meant to. "Sorry. Uncle Roland's right, Natalie. It looks as though we can't afford each other. Even if I loved you for yourself alone, I couldn't wait ten years." He began to pack.

She stared at him stunned. But she kept her chin up. "Wait Lloyd. I said ten years because, according to the terms of the will, I'm to take full control of my inheritance on my thirtieth birthday—or on the death of my uncle if that comes first."

She gave him a level gaze. "Do you get that, Lloyd? *Or on the death of my uncle if that comes first.*" In other words, if Uncle Roland drops dead tomorrow, I have full say over my own affairs."

Lloyd paused in the process of carefully folding his dinner jacket. "That's an interesting alternative." He looked tempted, then shook his head and went on packing. "Trouble is, Uncle Roland won't drop dead tomorrow—or in thirty-six hundred and fifty tomorrows. He's under sixty and keeps himself fit."

"But what if he has an accident? Or even commits suicide?"

Lloyd would have laughed at the words if it had not been for her tone. He paused again in his packing to stare at Natalie. There had been that in her voice that had made him shiver for Uncle Roland. Her eyes met his steadily. She could not bring herself to beg him not to leave her, he knew. She was a Bannerman, after all. She would not have said what she said if she had not had something in mind.

He weighed the promise in her eyes. Might as well hear her out. He had nothing to lose. "Yes?"

She nodded. "There's a way,

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Lloyd. The Bannerman Collection . . ."

BLIGHT HAD eliminated all the elms from Elm Street. But the turn-of-the-century Bannerman mansion still stood in all its muted elegance.

Natalie straightened Lloyd's tie as they waited on the doorstep. It was the housekeeper's afternoon off—Natalie had picked it for that reason—and Uncle Roland himself answered the door knocker.

He opened the door on its chain, stared at the pair of them, then grudgingly let them enter. He ushered them into the drawing room. Their gazes shot to the glass cases housing the Bannerman Collection.

Uncle Roland sat them down. Natalie hoped he wouldn't notice she wasn't wearing her grandmother's ring. She had pawned it so they would not have to cut the honeymoon short and give Uncle Roland more I-told-you-so ammo. She needn't have worried.

Uncle Roland sat in his thronelike armchair opposite the two of them on the sofa that might have been a love seat for all the room they took up and he gave Lloyd the greater share of his glances. It seemed clear he was trying to puzzle Lloyd out, wondering if he had pegged this young Pollard fellow entirely wrong.

Because there was absolutely no mention of money. Lloyd made cheerful small talk. He was good at that. And he was good at bringing a conversation around to a particular point of the compass. Uncle Roland was beginning to relax and Lloyd was bringing the talk about to the Bannerman collection.

Natalie had coached Lloyd. "It shouldn't be hard. He's always dying to show it off. Just bring it up. He'll be sure you're trying to get on his good side—" ('What good side?') "—but that won't keep him from going into his routine." Now she saw it was working.

Uncle Roland all but sprang to his feet, ready to give them the VIP guided tour.

Natalie coughed and wondered aloud apologetically if she might have something for her dry throat. Uncle Roland apologized in turn and bestirred himself to play host. He left the room. This was the chance she had promised Lloyd. She pointed the Reeves Affair piece out to Lloyd, then quickly followed Uncle Roland out to the kitchen and, while helping him ready the tray of sherry and biscuits, distracted him with idle chatter so that he would not hear Lloyd open and close the glass case.

On their way back Uncle

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Roland detained her for a moment to whisper his concern in her ear. "Tell me the truth, Natalie. Is he really turning out all right?"

She gave him a forced bright smile. "You'll see for yourself, Uncle Roland."

He looked at her till her eyes dropped. Then he nodded to himself and tightened his already tight lips and strode out with his tray.

Hands clasped behind his back, Lloyd stood leaning over a case across the room from the one holding the Reeves Affair piece. He was studying the faded handwriting on the tag attached to a sleeve derringer and turned with a start as Uncle Roland offered him sherry and biscuits.

Uncle Roland waited impatiently for them to finish. Then he rubbed his hands. Death brought Uncle Roland to life. He ran his eyes over the array of death weapons and the heat of passion blued his eyes.

"I imagine a private citizen couldn't get away with it these days. But in those days my father was police commissioner. He had only to say he would like to have these as keepsakes of his term of office and they were his. Each one of these weapons figured in a sensational shooting affair. I inherited my father's collection—and his fondness for it. There are some real beauties here. For instance, that derringer you were looking at, Pollard."

He told them the story of the derringer, with which a gambler had won a challenged hand. He told them the story of a seven-shooter. "Yes, the other poor devil counted six shots and came smiling out into the open and walked right into the seventh bullet."

Natalie's eyes grew fever-bright. "Show us the Reeves Affair, uncle."

Smiling, Uncle Roland crossed to the other side of the room, slid the glass door of the case open, and lovingly drew out the .38 pistol.

"The famous Reeves Affair!—though I see by your face, Pollard, that draws a blank. Long before your time, I realize. Well, this fellow Reeves found himself trapped by a lynch mob come to get him for the horribly brutal slaying of his unfaithful wife. He tried to stand the mob off but found himself with only one bullet left. He took this gun and put it to his temple."

Uncle Roland suited the action to the words and Lloyd felt something like fear watching the finger tighten on the trigger.

"But just then Reeves spotted

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his wife's lover in the mob. He turned the gun on the lover instead."

Uncle Roland swung the gun toward Lloyd and pulled the trigger. The bullet blew fear and astonishment—and all else of feeling and thought that was Lloyd Pollard away.

Uncle Roland stared down at the corpse. Shock wore off and fear and astonishment and an aching wrist were his. He looked to Natalie, fearing her hysteria. Her calmness alarmed him even more.

"Natalie, I don't understand."

"*I* do. Everyone knows you hated Lloyd."

"*Natalie!* You don't really believe I *meant* to kill him?"

"Even an accident will be hard to explain."

He narrowed his eyes. "You don't seem exactly broken up.

"If I give you an out will you relinquish control of my money?"

His eyes widened. "Yes, girl, *yes!*"

"Upon reconsideration, it was suicide. We came here to tell you about our . . . difficulties. I said I wanted your help in getting an annulment. When he saw there was no chance of a reconciliation, he grabbed the Reeves weapon, loaded it with a .38 cartridge he had brought along, and shot himself in despair. The police technician should find Lloyd's fingerprints on the cartridge. But you'd better smear any prints on the glass case."

Uncle Roland stared at her, then chuckled. "My dear, I see that when I pass on, the Bannerman Collection will fall into worthy hands."

DEATH IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

To Shayne, the encounter with the stunning blonde was a pleasant reprise of a long-dormant romance in Chicago. He had not an inkling that she was marked for murder or that her death would hurl him into a tornado of intrigue.

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THE WRONG DOOR

Things began to go sour when the stranger paid Clews $500 by mistake. Then Frank Christopher was murdered. Then came the Blonde. Then things really got sticky. Then everything came unstuck.

by DAVE BISCHOFF

IT WAS ONE of those New York days that make the tourists glad they don't live here. Evidently the April showers had lost their timetable, because they were about a month early. Half of them hit the soggy newspaper and cement streets disguised as ice, making singing in the rain rather painful.

It was one of those New York days that make *me* wish I didn't live here.

But then, where else in the world can a man get a good hot dog from a street vendor who also sells dope on the side? Where else in the world can a man see the Brooklyn Bridge? Where else in the world can a man feel like a sardine in a concrete can?

But I know if I moved away, I'd miss her.

She's ugly and mean quite often, but she's my mother and I love her, so that's why Harry Clews sticks it out here in his private eye job in the Big Rotten Apple.

End of touching rationalization.

As I was saying, it was sleeting outside that day, and it wasn't all that nice inside either. Inside my head, that is. Ten beer mugs with legs and arms and ball-peen hammers were tapping out a cacaphonic symphony in D minor in the recesses of my brain, while a Jack Daniel's bottle was doing the Russian kick dance behind my left ear lobe.

Anyway, I had a hangover.

I chased my third pair of aspirin that morning with a swig of brackish water from my office bathroom, and got back to some vital paperwork, which was the reason I wasn't at home in bed with a hot waterbottle and *Hollywood Squares* on the boob-tube.

The rain against the window pane sounded like a seashore

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storm in my delicate state, and I felt like a ship on the wrong side of the breakers. I went over and pulled the Venetian blinds closed, and thrust the curtains over the window, which gave the S.S. Harry Clews some ballast, but not a whole lot.

I was thinking about abandoning ship, when the pounding came on the door of my outer office, where a secretary used to sit before the Recession hit the

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Private Investigations business.

"*Door open*," I called, hoping it was the cleaning lady, who wouldn't bother me much.

There was a click and a woosh of the door opening, a couple of quiet footsteps on the reception room carpet, and then a man was standing in the interconnecting doorway.

This is the description I gave the police—medium height (5'-10", say); medium build (170 lbs on the scale of my judgment); medium face (plain, not handsome like yours truly). Stylishly long blond hair, clean shaven. Late twenties, early thirties—hard to tell. Wore a sharp red sports jacket, a blue checked tie, well-pressed blue trousers, brown leather shoes.

"Can I help you?" I asked, looking up from my mass of papers.

Nodding, he strolled over to the front of my desk, reached into his coat pocket, pulled out an obese billfold, selected five green pieces of paper with Ben Franklin's face on them, and laid them on my desk. He turned around and started walking out.

"*Hey*, wait a minute!" I called after him. "What's this for?"

He did a casual about-face, and gave me a mild smile.

"Surely you know, Mr. Christopher."

I had the feeling that, if he had a hat, he would have tipped it to me and slipped out the door.

Instead, he just slipped out the door.

I'd never seen the man before and he come in and hands me five hundred dollars. I was tempted to let him go; maybe he was the courier of some TV show called *The Five Hundredaire*. Who am I to question Fate when it sticks five hundred clams in front of my money-hungry face?

Trouble was, my name is not Mr. Christopher.

I yelled some words to that effect after him.

"*What*?" he said, coming back into the office, a big fat frown on his face.

"I said my name is Harry Clews. You must want Frank Christopher, the detective down at the other end of the hall. We're both getting our windows relabeled—that's why the offices look the same. You must have come up the wrong set of stairs. However, if you've got some private investigation that needs to be done, I'd be glad to help you out. Eighty a day, plus expenses; ten bucks less than what Frank charges. We're kind of competitors, you know. Frank asks more, even though I'm a better . . . "

I stopped talking when he took out a .38 special and gave

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me a clear view of its business end.

"You'll give me the money back, Mr. Clews," he said in a tense voice. The look of calmness had melted off him, replaced by a slightly frightened gaze, as though Daddy would not be pleased with his little boy's boo-boo.

"You only had to ask nice," I mumbled.

Keeping the gun trained on me, he pulled the bills from my extended hand, stuffing them in his pants pocket.

"I hear you've told the authorities about this, and I'll be back," he growled, like an amateur trying to bluff at poker.

But that gun was no bluff.

"Don't worry. I don't particularly care to see you again anyway."

"Yeah, well you just keep your mouth shut to anybody who comes in here asking about me."

"My friend, as my drinking buddies tell me, if silence was really golden, I'd be a rich man."

But he didn't stick around long enough to listen to my witticism. I heard the door slam, I shrugged, and went back to work juggling figures in my account books so the IRS people would be happy.

In fact, the incident rather amused me. I wondered what old Frank was up to. We weren't enemies in the capitalist tradition, but then we weren't the best of friends either. We both ate well and had beer money left over. Sometimes we'd even use that money to buy each other drinks. Ours was a gentlemanly competition.

As a matter of fact, the more I thought about it, the funnier the whole thing got.

That is, until the shots came blasting from the other end of the hall.

THERE WERE three of them

BANG! I lifted my head up, startled; then shrugged. Probably some flatulent truck backfiring on the street outside.

BANG! The sound associated itself with *gun, gun* with *man in my office*, the man who was going down the hall . . .

BANG! . . . where the shots were coming from.

I sprang up from my desk, knocking my wheeled chair back against the wall. Not taking the time to stick my shoes on, I hurried out to the hall in my stocking feet, swung around the side of the outer door, and caught a brief blur of a red sports coat disappearing around the corner. Frank's office was a good piece down from mine. I'd never hope to catch the man, nor did I particularly care to, as

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I'd left my gun back in my desk.

But if three shots had been fired, and then the man in the red coat had taken off like a hundred yard dasher, it didn't look promising that Frank was in very good shape. So I dashed down the long corridor to his office.

Heads began to poke themselves from the doors of other offices. Jaws dropped as I sped past them. Millie Hardgrove, a secretary for an accounting firm, stepped out in my way and almost got run over by the Harry Clews Express.

"Hey, Harry—what's *happening*?" she yelped as she sidestepped my run. "Where those shots I heard? Where are your shoes?"

"Call the police and an ambulance," I gasped. It's no fun to run with a hangover. I regretted the previous evening's binge at the *Easy Come, Easy Go* bar even more, especially the beer-chugging contest with the bartender.

I slowed my sprint down some by bouncing off the wall opposite Frank's office, then grabbing the edge of the doorframe as I whipped into the slightly ajar door, bursting it wide open with a clatter.

Frank kept a single room as an office. He was behind his desk, bent over his white blotter, taking a nap. Or so it seemed.

"Frank?" I tore over to the desk's side, shook his shoulder. His right arm slipped off the desk, and hung limply downward. I pushed him back all the way in his chair and three bloody bullet holes stared blindly at me from his chest.

I cursed and felt for a pulse in his neck. Nothing. No—wait. It felt like a flutter of a bird's heart, but there was something.

His eyes flickered open. I could see the sand was running out of his hourglass very quickly.

"Frank," I puffed, out of breath from the run. "Who was that man?"

His eyes were not looking at me, just staring off into the empty air. But he worked his lips with the little energy he had left, and a little word that sounded like, "Shirley," came from them like a short gas leak. Then he was gone. Dead as dead can be. Dead as maybe *I* would be if my morning visitor had seen fit to pump me with a few of his calling cards.

I cursed again and looked down at his desk. In a pool of dark red blood were the five hundred dollars the man had tried to give me, thinking I was Frank Christopher. I made a quick search for anything in his desk that might give me a clue

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to what the devil he'd been up to that had cost him his life. If there was anything, I passed over it.

I crossed to his familiar green mini-icebox, ignored the chilled case of beer with an inward shudder, and opened the freezer section for some ice cubes, which I held against my throbbing head until the police arrived.

"Your name, sir?" the greying, pot-bellied sergeant asked, ready to jot down my response on a grey pad of paper.

"Clews—Harrison B."

The stretcher boys were lugging Frank's body out to the ambulance.

"Relation to deceased?" he sighed, obviously bored with the whole business, counting the days to retirement.

I was sitting on Frank's couch, feet propped on his coffee table filled with recent copies of *The Reader's Digest* and *Time*. I felt rotten. I'm never exactly pleased when a fellow member of my profession departs this vale of tears in a wake of blood, for in their passage they trot over my own grave. The fact that I knew the man, that he was an occassional bar buddy, that we were friendly rivals, that somehow, for some harebrained reason, this lame excuse for a cop seemed to suspect *me*, did not help my state of mind. Plus my headache, of course.

"We were acquaintances," I breathed.

The policeman, one Sergeant Malone, squinted at me through his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Rivals?"

"Friendly competitors, blast it."

"Rivals. Both private dicks? On the same floor? Definitely rivals."

I rallied my best cop-bating abilities, and let rip. "Look, when one of your boys buys it, you don't start investigating his precinct house, do you?"

Sergeant Malone bit on his pencil in thought, and then started writing again, speaking with only half his mind.

"We get our pay regular from the city, Mr. Clews. Now, you realize that I'm going to have to do a little questioning around here about your relationship with Mr. Christopher, so if you had any serious problems with him, you'd best tell me before I hear about them from less sympathetic mouths."

"We've had a few words at one another, sure. Nothing serious, though. Listen—let me give you my story so I can get home and get some rest. This has not been a Sunday picnic for me, you know."

More like a midnight picnic in Central Park.

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"No. I should think not. Very well, Mr. Clews. I'm listening."

I filled two pages of his pad with my tale, pretty much as it really happened, from the entrance of the killer in my office, to my discovery that poor Frank had died of acute lead poisoning of the chest. But I kept the "Shirley" bit to myself. Don't ask me why. I guess I just have a perverse pleasure in withholding information from the police. Besides, the idea of doing some private investigation into the case had begun to take shape in my head.

After the fat sergeant had finished scribbling his literary gem, he said that I could go, not bothering to thank me.

"You can expect a call sometime soon to come down to Headquarters to sign your statement," he muttered, rejoining the crew examining the office.

I went back to my office to slip on my loafers, then headed for my apartment, where I took two Alka Seltzers and then made like a bad race car driver and crashed.

The next morning dawned on a physically sound Harry Clews finishing up his tax forms in his office, suffering merely from the debris of depression left by the previous day's emotional storm.

I envy those people who can stay on the same emotional plane come hell or high water, treating assaults on the emotions like mosquito bites—put some salve on the wounds and forget 'em. Oh, I put up a good front. I look calm as you please. But inside, life has eaten away some of my center support. Hell, you aren't my psychiatrist, are you? My bartender is.

I finished up the forms in the late morning, and went out to mail them in the sunny after-rain-clean day which sat on the buildings and streets. The fresh air served to clear my head, which was congested with numbers and cryptic Internal-Revenue-Servicese, that alien language which most people pay a tax broker to translate for them. But not stubborn, hard-headed Harry B.-for-Bull-headed Clews.

For lunch I had a pastrami on rye—no mustard please—pickle on the side—thank you—at the local deli—fittingly run by some Arabian family.

Only in New York . . .

I was feeling better about life when I finally ambled back to my office. So much better, in fact, that I loped up the three flights to my floor instead of taking the elevator, merely for the exercise.

That's why I was breathing hard when I saw the gorgeous blonde sitting prettily in my re-

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ception room. Not what you think. Her trim, curvy body encased in fresh silk and cotton, her fashion model face batting thick eyelashes at one of my old *Life* magazines, her long lustrous waterfall of hair spilling over her shoulders added not one breath of extra respiration.

"Hi," I said as I entered. "The modeling agency is on the second floor."

She folded the magazine, looked up and gave me a smile I haven't had since I told some high society chick I had the goods on her husband that she needed for a divorce.

"Ah, Mr. Clews," she said in a voice like Cherry Hering—sweet and intoxicating—"I'm so glad you've returned. I thought perhaps you'd left for the day."

"If I knew you were coming, I wouldn't have left for lunch. Come on into my office, Miss—"

"Karen Morningstar."

No ring of bondage on her finger—*good*! I generally don't become emotionally entangled with my clients, but there were always exceptions, and the extra juices running havoc in my veins were telling me that I hoped Miss Morningstar might be one of them.

I unlocked my door, pushed it aside, beckoning Miss Stunning—ah, Miss Morningstar—to a chair situated in front of my desk.

"A drink perhaps, Miss Morningstar?"

"That's very nice of you. Have you any milk? I haven't had any lunch today, and that would help."

"Nope. I'm afraid I've got nothing but some warm Jack Daniel's."

"Oh, well—no matter."

"I can call up a sandwich for you from the drugstore on the corner."

"No. I'll live."

I settled into my seat, folded my hands on my desk, and put my Efficient Private Investigator look on, to mask any naked lust that might leak through my countenance.

"Now, what can a hard working, conscientious and discreet private eye do for you, Miss Morningstar?"

She put her cream leather purse on her lap, snapped it open, drew out a neat manila envelope, drew out a couple of eight-by-ten glossies, and laid them gently on my desk. One was a picture of Frank Christopher. The other was of the man who must have shot him.

IF A PICTURE indeed speaks a thousand words, I had two thousand of them in front of me. Trouble was, they weren't in any semblance of order.

"You look shocked, Mr. Clews," she said, taking a

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cigaret case from her bag, removing one from it, then holding it in her hand, forgotten, unlit. I could sense the trouble boiling beneath her cool exterior.

"Merely puzzled, Miss. Maybe you can elaborate on what you've shown me here."

"Very well." She sat on the edge of the seat, gazing earnestly into my eyes with her gorgeous set of blues. "Frank and I were . . ."

"The very best of friends," I euphemized. "Lucky Frank."

"Yes. We were even considering marriage at one time."

"I'm sorry."

She studied my floor for a moment, and then looked back up at me, the sunlight from my window glimmering in teary eyes.

"You were the last one to see him alive, Mr. Clews."

"How do you know that?" I countered.

"Was he dead when you saw him?"

"Maybe." I poured myself a neat whiskey, and baptised my tonsils.

I think at this point we can discuss money," she said matter-of-factly, a hard edge creeping into her voice.

"I said nothing about money, Miss Morningstar. Frank and I knew each other, respected each other, and I'd like to even the score with whoever killed him as much as you do."

"Then you know what I've come for."

"The pictures spell it out pretty plainly. Somehow, you were involved in whatever affair that caused Frank's death. The question is—what was that affair? I'm going to have to know that before I can even begin to help you."

She sighed and stuck the cigaret in her mouth and I gave her a light.

"I'm afraid I know very little," she said.

"Sometimes in my business information is like salt—a little goes a long way."

"I'll tell you what I know, but I'm afraid I don't know where to begin."

"Begin, Miss Morningstar, with how you came by this little number." I waved the picture of the killer. "Then I shall be glad to hear the rest of your knowledge in whatever order you may choose to give it."

"Frank kept most of his files at his place, particularly items of a touchy nature."

"And you have a key?"

"Of course. Like I said, Frank and I were—"

"The very best of friends. Yes, I understand that already."

"And he told me a great deal . . ."

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"But not everything, I take it."

"Mr. Clews, sometimes I didn't particularly want to hear what he *did* tell me. It was just that occasionally Frank needed someone to talk to."

"Understandable. Any idea at all how Frank came by this photo? And how did you know this man killed him?"

"Where he got it, I can't say. I happened to be visiting him several weeks ago while he was developing some pictures. This was one of them. I read the description in the newspaper of the man who had shot him. I went over and got the photo last night, before the police came to inspect his apartment this morning."

"And you didn't take anything else out that might have helped us?"

"This is the only thing I knew about. Besides, I was afraid the police might come and discover me in his files."

"Have you been to the police?"

"Who do you think identified the body? Frank has no relatives."

I made a tent of my fingers and gave my nose some shelter. "Well then, perhaps you can give me the rest of the story over an early dinner."

"But you've just eaten."

"My dinners usually come in a glass."

I took her to a nice Italian bistro I know. Very romantic—they even serve breakfast by candlelight. Lounging back in the cushioned chair, swirling the scarlet Chianti in my wine glass, I watched the golden glow of the table's dripping light do strange and marvelous things with her face and hair. Certainly a superior atmosphere to the late American shamus-hole ambience of my office.

She carved up her veal parmigiana with relish, and chewed a piece, assuring me it was delicious and, yes, she felt much better. A little more cheese for the spaghetti? Of course. I passed it to her, and she took it with a sleek, graceful hand with long light blue fingernails.

A shake of her hair, a frown that dimmed the lighting several candlepower and she was into her dark story.

Frank had been in financial trouble. This she had learned not from his mouth but through his actions, his attitudes. From bits and pieces of mumbled conversation, she had been led to believe that he had take a certain desperate measure to come by some cash. He had done something for an individual involved in organized crime. What, she had no idea.

Had he killed someone? No,

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she was certain he hadn't done that. Frank would never . . .

"Of course not," I assured her.

Something illegal. Something he got inside the Organization with, netting some information in the process—information which could be quite harmful to his employer in the hands of the law or rival gang factions.

When he needed more money, even more desperately, they had no more jobs for him. He had no choice but to blackmail this man.

That would be what the five hundred was for?

Yes.

The puzzle pieces were appearing in larger numbers.

"Your turn." she said.

"To tell my part of the story; is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I prefer to keep it to myself."

"How can we work together?" she pleaded.

"Who said anything about working together? I just needed your side so I knew a few more facts. I'll take care of it. The puzzle is in good hands."

She crunched her last piece of bread, washed it down with some wine. "I'm not so sure it's a puzzle that should be answered, Mr. Clews, now that I think about it in less emotional retrospect."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"Perhaps I made a mistake in coming to you at all. Maybe we should just let things lie as they are."

I was a bit perplexed.

"After this couple of hours you've spent telling me about it, you suddenly up and say No show! Why the sudden change of mind?"

"In explaining the background, I've realized several things. First, though I loved him, Frank took a chance, and lost. Why involve anyone else in his mistake? Second, the risk involved would be too great for you, perhaps for me as well. From the sounds of your story, the gunman won't like it much if he sees you again. And last, I know now that I just want to forget Frank. Our relationship was dying in the first place. The grief at his death lighted a spark of revenge in me that has suddenly died out totally."

"Just like that?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm a busy woman, Mr. Clews. I don't have time to be obsessed with the past."

I didn't like it. There was a fishy smell in the air and it wasn't from the kitchen.

"Just what do you do that keeps you so busy, Miss Morningstar?"

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"You must not keep up in politics, Mr. Clews. I'm the new city Councilwoman."

I thought I'd seen her face before—not in magazine ads selling loungerie, but in political posters selling Karen Morningstar.

"Ah! The female *enfant terrible*."

"Your French is terrible."

"So are your lies, Miss Morningstar. You'll make a rotten politician."

"You're saying I'm not telling you the truth about what I know?"

"That's what I'm saying."

She pulled her pocketbook up, fished out two twenty dollar bills and threw them at me.

"That should cover the time I've cost you, and the check for the meal."

"Partially," I smiled, picking the money off the table and stuffing it in my pocket.

Snapping her pocketbook closed, she rose and began to walk for the door.

"Oh, *Karen*!" I called after her.

She stopped and turned, furious yet curious.

"Doing anything Friday night?"

Well, I mean if she likes detectives, what's wrong with *me*? After all, most love affairs start out with lies, don't they?

But she just made an unladylike gesture and stalked out.

I finished my wine, and then headed for the *Easy Come* for some serious think-drinking.

BOTH STOMACH and head were sloshy with drink and thought, neither of which achieved much, as I surrendered my bar stool to the late night and pushed myself into the general direction of my apartment. The night was chill with the memory of a harsh winter, which perhaps saved my life, pulling some of the alcohol out of me during the fifteen minute walk to my pad.

I spent another five grumbling over the three locks of my door with their various keys, then fumbled for the light switch as I entered, leaving the door agape for some minimal groping light.

He must have sneaked in through the doorway in his bedroom slippers, because I swear I didn't hear him until he spoke to me, and I felt the hard cruel metal of his gun in the small of my back.

"Careful, Clews. This is a gun."

"Gosh; I thought it might be a banana. Mind if I switch on the light?"

I heard him shut the door.

"Yeah. Go ahead."

I snicked the room from dark

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to light, and turned to face my guest.

"Hi! Come to try to give me another five hundred?"

Frank's killer, you understand. Same outfit, under a heavy coat. With his gun, he signaled me to stand against the wall and then he frisked me for weapons, discovering a Bic pen and a few balls of lint.

"You don't carry a gun, Clews?"

"No, but watch out. I spit mean."

"You're awful mouthy for a man who might die in a few minutes."

The .38 had a silencer. He wasn't fibbing.

"Thanks for the 'might'."

"Depends."

On what?"

"You been a good boy?"

"Sure."

"You didn't tell the cops about me coming to your office by mistake before I shot Christopher?"

"*You* shot him? Gee, I didn't know that."

"Come off it."

"No, I didn't tell them," I lied.

"Smart man, Clews."

He bought it. Maybe *I* should go into politics.

"You sure got a messy apartment, Clews." He picked up a pair of socks off an easy chair and sat down, keeping the gun on me. His eyes roamed around the room. "Yeah. Real dump, this place."

"Well, if you're going to be around for a while, maybe you'd like to join me in a cup of coffee. I need one to clear my head."

"Must be a mighty big cup," he sneered.

"Very *good*!"Criminals love flattery, you know. "So, what do you say?"

"I've got to watch you make it."

I gave my best shrug. "Why not?"

Into the kitchen we went.

"So what may I put down this little late night visit to, Mr.—"

"Nobody. John Nobody." He grinned at the cleverness of his pseudonym. "You can call me that. I thought I'd come and see how much you know about me and maybe kill you if I feel like it."

"You're not from *Good Housekeeping* then, doing an article on Private Eye homemaking?" I threw a couple of empty soup cans into the already full wastebasket, clearing the way to the big metal cans in the kitchen marked FLOUR, SUGAR, COFFEE, TEA and decorated with daisies. An old girl friend gave them to me.

"Uh-uh. So how much do you know, Clews?"

I pulled the COFFEE container

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to me and opened it, grabbed the .22 pistol I keep there, pivoted sharply, and shot him in the right arm, causing him to drop the gun. I was aiming at the torso, but I didn't complain at the results.

The gun skittered off into the corner. I bent down and scooped it up. Mr. Nobody bled onto the tile floor, staring at me in surprise.

"Well, I've got to keep it somewhere." I shrugged, waggling the weapon at him. "Besides, I drink instant."

"What are you going to do?" he grimaced, holding his wound.

"Call the police."

"Oh? You got something to stop the bleeding?"

"Sure. You come along ahead of me, and we'll go to the bathroom."

He obediently plodded along in front of me, rocking back and forth in pain. I guided him through the living room toward the bathroom . . .

. . . and saw that the front door was open.

He'd closed it, hadn't he?

Yes, he had, I thought, but he must not have locked it, which meant . . .

I made a quick move for cover, but evidently his partner was behind me, because the last I remember was a woosh of something coming toward me in the air, and a dandy, albeit painful, astronomy lesson which ended when a lot of very dark clouds suddenly slid across my private sky . . .

Waking up is usually a painful experience for me anytime, but when my head throbs like an overinflated basketball and my searching hand comes back coated in sticky red stuff from its exploration of the bump on my head, it is particularly agonizing.

The world was distinctly out of focus. I could make out some light and a few double-imaged people in the room. I closed my eyes and tried again. The picture was a definite improvement. It was not my room that I was lying in.

They must have carted me somewhere.

The realization of my situation flowed through me like a river through a bursting dam. I was in trouble. Lots of it.

One of the men was Mr. Nobody, arm in sling, smiling at me in a not-so-nice way. Another was an older man, heavy of build with a face not even a mother could love—cold and lumpy as a mound of dough and about as expressive. The guy who had beaned me, probably.

The third was James Raymond Shirly.

I could have hit myself. Of

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course, of course, of course! Christopher had said "Shirly", not "Shirley". A gangster, not a girl! James Raymond Shirly, chieftain of a few big rackets on the East Side. I remember once, a couple of years before, he'd tried to hire me to do a minor dastardly deed for him.

I should have remembered. It wouldn't have done me a *whole* lot of good, but all the same . . .

Laugh at me if you like, but *I* didn't. Blame the present state of my mind—I was thinking a lot about women those days. Thus when Frank's last word was spoken, I immediately assumed it to be some lady he'd been involved with.

"He's waking up," said Nobody, nudging Doughface, who brought up a gun to keep me in my place. Curiously I was not tied down or hindered in any physical way save for the steady avalanche of pain rumbling through my head.

"*Hey*, Mr. Shirly," Nobody continued, "He's waking up. You can talk to him now."

"Thank you, Al." Shirly moved forward gracefully, a brandy snifter in his hand, a smoking jacket around his stout middle-aged body. "Mr. Clews, welcome to one of my—ah—offices. I hope you aren't *too* uncomfortable."

"Merely a slight case of mortal agony."

"Well, at least you still possess your speaking faculties, which are all I need." He sucked on a cigaret, and blew out smoky tusks from his nose, which scattered into random wisps on my rumpled shirt in their attempt to gore me. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you this way, but we're going to have to know a few things before we let you continue on your path to the bottom of the Hudson."

"Can the information be exchanged for my life?"

"I think not. You have already caused us a deal of trouble. I've never been kindly inclined toward you, Mr. Clews. In your career, you've sometimes marred certain of my operations, unbeknownst to you of course, and now this regrettable set of circumstance leaves me no choice but to decrease the private detective population of this fair city by yet another digit."

"Frank Christopher died because your goon goofed, didn't he?"

"Yes—Alvin made a pair of mistakes that day, didn't you, Al?"

"Look, Boss, I said I'd make it up to you, didn't I?" sputtered Al.

"Oh, and you most certainly shall," nodded Shirly.

"Did Al tell you *why* he killed Christopher?"

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"Mr. Christopher had always been trouble of some sort. As you know through Al's other mistake of that day, we'd been making payments to the man for withholding information, refraining from disposing of him for—um—certain—um—delicate reasons. He demanded more money of Al, underlining the threat with a waving gun. Al's the nervous sort. Al shot him. I'm afraid he may well have to take a short sabbatical out of the state until the affair blows over."

"But only after he finishes a small task at the river. Right?"

"I fear that is the truth, Mr. Clews. Now—would you care to give us the facts you have on this matter of the past few days, particularly anything about where Christopher hid the information he had collected about me? If the law finds that—well, let's not think of it shall we? You *should* know that if you produce this knowledge for us, your death will be quick and painless. Otherwise . . . "

Doughface has been kneading his knuckles, hunks of bone and muscle a pig would be proud to own. Shirly raised an eyebrow at him, he nodded and pulled a thin, tapered switchblade from his pocket which he snicked open and used to clean the underside of a fingernail. Al went over to him, and took his gun back.

THERE WAS A KNOCK at the door.

"Who is it?" grunted Al.

A woman's voice came muffled through the wood.

"I've got to talk to Shirly."

Shirly stared at me intently, and he must have seen the flash of recognition in my face. He sighed, shrugged and told Al to unlock the door.

"You might as well let her in. The sight of her won't do Clews any good and might teach that woman some discretion."

Al obeyed and Miss Morningstar burst into the room, primly clad in a grey pantsuit. She headed toward Shirly.

"Shirly, it's this Crime Commission meeting tomorrow. I've got an address to prepare, and you still haven't let me know what you want me . . . "

She saw me and stared at me like I was her dead father.

"Clews!" she whispered, startled.

"Yes, my dear," said Shirly. "Your failed project. Had you gotten what I asked for from him this afternoon, he'd be sleeping snugly in his bed. Now . . .

"But now it looks like I'm soon to be sleeping soundly in another *kind* of bed. Hello, Karen."

Her head swung to Shirly.

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"You're not going to kill him, are you?"

Shirly lifted his arms in a helpless gesture.

"What choice have I got? Besides, this is not the first time he's poured sand in my clockwork."

"It was *your* man's mistake," she spat, pointing at Al. "If *he* hadn't . . ."

"*Tsk tsk!* My mind is made up, my dear. Now would you care to stick around and watch the darker side of the business you're in up to your pretty nose or leave?"

"*No!* I'll not *have* it. When Frank got me involved with you, I promised I'd break off relations as soon as I got what I wanted, both to Frank and myself."

"But you wanted a political office. A difficult affair, to be sure. No, my dear—it's not that easy."

"And I also promised myself that that I'd not be party to any violence."

"But you won't be. You can just walk out the door and forget that Mr. Clews ever existed. We'll talk about your little rebellious nature at a more propitious time. Now, I think it would be best if you departed."

The whole thing was clearing up, like mud in dirty water settling to the bottom. Frank had a girlfriend with intelligence and ambition. "Hey," says Frank. "I know a guy who can help you out." Helpful Shirly enters scene, gets her elected, but for his own purposes. Meanwhile, she and Frank are on the outs. Frank and Shirly are on the outs. Frank has lots on Shirly, which he keeps locked away some place. Maybe someone has instructions to open it up and hand it to the cops if something happens to Frank.

So Frank blackmails Shirly. Five hundred a week to keep mum. Delivered regularly, personally, by a certain man. But the day before, Shirly sends a new courier; Al, who doesn't know the building. Goes in wrong entrance—goes in wrong door—delivers to wrong detective—*me*.

We know what happens next.

Following day, Shirly sends Karen to see how much I know—to see if maybe Frank had spilled the beans to a fellow shamus concerning where he had the infor stored away.

It doesn't work. She gets nothing out of me. Karen changes horses in mid-stream, warning me to stay out of case. But Shirly *has* to know, so he sends Al out again, with Doughface along to back him up.

All of which ends with bloody-headed me sitting in a

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chair holding a halfway ticket for a crossing of the Hudson.

I had one chance, one card still face down on the table that could be an ace or a deuce. I turned it over.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'd like to get on with what I know," I said, studying the situation of the room, where people were standing etc. for future purposes.

"Excellent, Mr. Clews," chuckled Shirly, "I knew you'd be reasonable."

"To begin with, Frank never talked business with me. So I don't know *where* he hid the stuff he had on you. However, he lived for a few minutes after Al shot him. Long enough to let me know exactly *why* he died," I lied. "And it wasn't because of a case of bad nerves, either."

I was watching Al very carefully. I liked what I saw.

"No, Mr. Shirly," I continued. "Frank didn't demand more money from you, nor did he draw a gun. There wasn't one in the room when I burst in."

"I—I—I took it with me," stuttered Al.

"*Uh nuh*, Al. When you walked into Frank Christopher's office and dropped the five hundred on his desk, he made you stop; didn't he? Made you stop, because he recognized you, and knew a little bit about you, about a few of your extra-James-Raymond-Shirly-gang activities that could well result in your escalation to the top of that organization to replace its dead leader. And he tried to blackmail *you*, didn't he, Al? And you got scared, and you shot him."

Shirly's thick eyebrows were down as far as they could go. He began to nod. "That would explain a few things, Al."

"No, he's lying. I—"

"Carter," Shirly sighed, stubbing out his cigaret in an ashtray.

With a motion almost too quick to catch, the heavy man threw his knife, giving Al a metal appendage growing out of his chest. Al gasped, staggered, reflexively squeezed the trigger of his silenced gun. There were a cough, a thud, and a crimson flower suddenly bloomed on Doughface Carter's forehead. The two collapsed almost simultaneously, like a couple of boxers who've gone down for the big K.O.

I didn't wait around for the judge's decision.

I bolted out of the chair and dived at Shirly, who was already reaching into his jacket for his gun. My tackle connected solidly with his midsection, bowling him over a chair, with me going along for the ride. He pushed me off him with a thrust of his powerful

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arms, and I rolled clear and hit the leg of the chair. Pain shot up my back.

I saw him groping for his gun again. His arm stopped. He had it. I kicked out my leg into his bicep, flinging the arm out. Another kick, and the gun flew out of his hand, dropping a few feet away. He grunted like a bull and hit me across the left cheek with a fist as hard as anything I've come across, hard enough to rattle my wisdom teeth and send me sprawling back on the floor.

Through a haze, I saw him crawling toward his gun. It occurred to me that I'd better not let him pick it up. With a surge of energy I didn't know I had, I hurled my six-foot-tall, one hundred-and-ninety pounds and landed squarely on his back. He shrugged me off with a mighty heave, and the next thing I knew we were both standing up, jowl to jowl, breathing hard.

I gave him a left jab in the stomach to let him know he wasn't the only one with a hard fist. The blow pushed a little air out of him, but not enough. He answered with a right-handed haymaker that came out of left field and seemed to shatter my jaw. I staggered back, sucked in some air and figured I'd be better off wrestling him, considering that he had turned his back on me and was headed for that gun of his.

I jumped onto his broad back and began pounding on his neck with both fists. He had reached his desk, and must have laid a hand on his paperweight, because suddenly he hit the side of my head with something a lot harder than a fist. He didn't have the leverage to hit me very hard, but the force was enough to knock me back onto the floor, which hit me pretty hard as well. Between the two, I was knocked up kinda bad.

From what seemed a very distant viewpoint, I saw him struggle over to where the gun lay, pick it up, aim it at me. It was like watching some movie of a gun aimed at me, I was so dazed. It seemed like he stood like that for a long time.

I HEARD A small thud—no, two of them, and James Shirly began to wobble like the leaning Tower of Pisa in an earthquake. He fell, hitting the floor like a carcass of meat falling off its hook.

Then he lay very still.

I managed to get my rubber legs under me and almost did some toppling myself, but for a small smooth hand which slid around my arm and steadied me.

I looked into two blue eyes blinking tears. The silenced au-

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tomatic sat limply in her hand. I knew she'd saved my life.

"Thanks!" I groaned.

"I've never killed anyone before." She looked down at the gun, and dropped it to the floor as though it had suddenly turned into a tarantula.

"You did the right thing," I said, pulling the pieces of my consciousness back into a reasonable facsimile of a whole.

"Yes, but that doesn't help."

"Look; you're free now. In a way, that bullet saved your life as well. You can be your own person."

"Are you kidding? This will ruin my career!" She sagged into a chair.

"*Uh-uh.*"

I picked up the automatic and wiped off the fingerprints with my shirt. I put the gun on the desk.

"Just walk out of here now and forget the whole thing. Forget you ever knew Shirly. I'll take care of everything."

She gazed at me strangely.

"You'd do *that* for me?"

I shrugged. "Why not?" I gave her my very best Pepsodent smile. She arose slowly from the chair and walked away. I waited for the click of her high heels to fade out, then I picked up the phone.

"Hello? Police Headquarters? Say, I'm a private eye named Harry Clews. No, wiseacre—C-L-E-W-S . . . Yeah. Say—you wouldn't have a Sergeant Malone of Homicide working the graveyard shift tonight, would you? . . . You would? . . . Great; put him on"

In a couple of minutes the Sergeant was on the phone.

"Yeah, Clews. What's up?"

"*Hey*, I thought I'd come down tonight and sign those copies of my statement on the Christopher murder case."

"What? *Clews*—it's two in the *morning*!"

"Oh, by the way, you might want to drop by this room I'm in at the moment. There are a lot of dead bodies around."

"What?"

I located a piece of labeled stationary on the desk, and gave him the address, which was news to me, too.

The next afternoon, they finally let me out of questioning, promising I'd be back.

I told them sure, and headed back to my office where I did some finger walking over the phone book, and made a call to a certain someone's office.

It took me a moment to get through her secretary, but I got through.

"Bottom of the afternoon to you, Miss Morningstar. Would you by any chance be busy this Friday evening?"

She was. She was going out with me.

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Miss Otis was the ideal nurse-companion– Mrs. Roydan the ideal patient. Who'd guess that in such placid soil seeds of murder grew?

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PAINTED IN CRIMSON

by PAULINE C. SMITH

MISS OTIS had almost forgotten her dull and tasteless apartment, the tiresome routine of a State Hospital job. *Almost* forgotten? Indeed, she had erased her entire existence before the life that she now lived.

To loll in a warm and perfumed tub, eat filet mignon, sip fine armagnac, read mystery stories, watch color TV—*this* was the life she had been born for—this, her destiny.

She walked over thick carpets into Mrs. Roydan's sitting room. "How are we doing?" she asked in a voice bright and high, pitched at a level usually reserved for puppydogs and small children by those who knew neither.

Mrs. Roydan did not respond, but Mrs. Roydan rarely responded. Mrs. Roydan was as senile as they come—way out, living in her own small world, a little private world. All Miss Otis had to do was move her around, order her meals and hairdresser, select the clothes she wore each day, suggest her activities.

"Well now, isn't that nice?" caroled Miss Otis, leaning over to stare blindly at the pale and passionless colors smoothed over canvas on the easel, as she thought, *thank God she doesn't slop the paint all around so I have to clean her up, and the carpet and the chair and her clothes, too!*

"Well, that's just *lovely!*" she cried, as she glanced at her watch to ascertain that she wouldn't have to guide her patient to the bathroom to wash her hands for another half hour and so could read at least three more chapters. "It's a very nice picture," she added and, having absolved herself from duty for thirty minutes, returned to her book.

When Mrs. Roydan's son interviewed her, he had explained, "My mother needs someone with her. Constantly. That's all. Someone to direct her, watch over her, offer her an interest."

Mrs. Roydan's son appeared to be slightly distracted—a big businessman with big business

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and his own family on his mind.

"My mother," he explained, "has always been protected."

He needed to explain no further. Miss Otis *knew* his mother had always been protected. She *knew* of the money and advantages that had been available for a lifetime to offer that protection—she knew how it was, not that she knew by experience, but through envy.

She nodded and clasped her hands on her starched white lap. "I know," she said, as she crossed her ankles modestly.

"My mother"—he went on with his explanation, his hands spread flat on the desk before him—"my mother has great pride."

Miss Otis understood that pride, the pride of being well groomed, perfectly coiffed, nails polished, casually serene, assured and shining. She nodded.

"Since the stroke—" Mrs. Roydan's son's hands turned on the desk, palms up and vulnerable—"she has been . . . well, not herself." He straightened his shoulders with effort and cleared his throat. "She needs someone constantly. I cannot put her in a nursing home."

"Of course not," agreed Miss Otis, her face simulating shock.

"So I must have someone with her. A companion." His face emptied, asking Miss Otis to fill it up.

"Yes," she said, gently efficient. "You need a woman who will understand and wish to help." With his agreeing nod, she became tactfully functional. "Someone with a nursing background, but not too professional. One who understands therapy without being bound by therapeutic rules. A friend!"

"*Exactly!*" Mrs. Roydan's son leaned forward and placed the job in her hands on her starched white lap.

Mrs. Roydan was something else. She sat, in ramrod seclusion, in a green crushed velvet chair that exactly matched the silk of her gown, cool and remote while her son introduced Miss Otis, who had great difficulty in keeping her beady eyes from roving the spacious apartment.

Miss Otis had only one friend in whom to confide her good fortune, a Miss Margate across the hall. Miss Margate was jealous as sin. Miss Otis could tell by the way she sniffed and said, "But you'll be so terribly *confined*, taking care of an old lady around the clock."

"Confined?" Miss Otis sniffed back.

"You call it *confined* when I'll have a whole apartment to dance around in?"

This caused Miss Margate to

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look surprised at the thought of Miss Otis dancing anywhere. Miss Otis attempted to enlarge on a description of the apartment, discovering that she had no words in her vocabulary to describe an opulence she had never before encountered. She was reduced to an arms-open gesture encompassed all the beauty ever known to the world.

"It's a *huge* apartment," she said. "One of those condominiums, I think. Anyway, her son said she'd lived there practically forever. It looks out on the park and I'll have a room and bath of my own. Mrs. Roydan's got her own bedroom and sitting room and bath. Besides there's the big living room and a dining room and a den filled with books."

"It'll be terrible to clean," observed Miss Margate.

"*Clean?*" Miss Otis turned grandly from her suitcase and shrugged her shoulders. "There's a woman who comes in to clean, and somebody to wash the windows, and a restaurant downstairs to send up the meals when I want them to."

With this, Miss Margate, overwhelmed, faded across the hall before she remembered an argument to minimize Miss Otis' good fortune, and reappeared to offer it.

"But she's *crazy!*" she called back in triumph. "You couldn't *give* me all the rooms, parks, restaurants and books in the world to take care of a crazy woman!" she finished exultantly, then added, "Around the clock."

"She is *not* crazy," said Miss Otis, snapping her suitcase shut. "She's had a stroke, that's all."

"He *said*—this woman's son *said* the doctor recommended that she be put away."

"In a rest home," interrupted Miss Otis. "That's all. Where she could be taken care of and watched over."

"*Aha! Watched* over! Why would she have to be *watched* over unless she was crazy?"

Miss Otis glared at her neighbor and opened her mouth to declare that anyone who thought a stroke victim crazy was crazy herself, when Miss Margate suggested that, even if the woman wasn't entirely crazy, she was probably a little nuts after that stroke. Anyway, it was clearly dangerous to be all alone with her twenty-four hours a day and not even a minute off.

"Right around the clock," she repeated. "*I* wouldn't do it!" She backed across the hall, closed the door after her and sank to the edge of her bed and wept with envy at Miss Otis' good luck and hoped the woman *was*

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crazy and would so something awful.

Miss Otis picked up her suitcase and left the room she had detested and desired to leave ever since she'd moved in. Her elation over her wondrous lot did not return until she was halfway across town and realized that Miss Margate's dire predictions were nothing but sour grapes, and that Miss Margate would give her eyeteeth for what Miss Otis was going to.

Miss Otis became easily accustomed to steak, brandy, solid comfort and luxury. Indeed, she found herself thinking, less than a month after she had taken up her new duties, how absolutely perfect everything would be if only Mrs. Roydan were out of the way. Not that Mrs. Roydan was so terribly difficult, but there she was, always waiting—waiting. And watching with that superior look on her face. It made Miss Otis downright nervous to look up and see those cold gray eyes watching and the curled lips waiting—so what was she watching?

Miss Otis, of course, as her caretaker sank her teeth in a luscious, medium-rare bit of filet, as Miss Otis sank with a contented sigh into velvet cushions—knowing that never before his Miss Otis eaten such steak or sat on such cushions. Waiting . . . well, what was she waiting for? She was waiting to be turned on, for Mrs. Roydan's turn-on valve had been damaged by the stroke, and she needed a twist of the key to get going.

Miss Otis entered her bedroom each morning. "Time to rise and shine," she caroled, a biting edge to the treble of her voice. "Up, *up!*" she cried, and Mrs. Roydan rose. "Now to dress. What would we like to wear?" Brightly, as Miss Otis pawed through cool colors, her fingers lingering to stroke soft fabrics while Mrs. Roydan watched with supercilious distant eyes.

She could dress herself once the key was turned, the clothing selected and laid out. She could do anything—she just couldn't *think* to do it. As the doctor explained to Miss Otis (and that was another thing—Miss Otis had to trundle Mrs. Roydan to the doctor once a month in her own beat-up Volkswagon while Mrs. Roydan's Contenental sat grandly idle in the garage downstairs)—well, anyway, the doctor informed Miss Otis (as if he were speaking to a servant), "Mrs. Roydan can function quite well. It's only that the thought processes, therefore her

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motor activities, have been slowed."

You can say that again, thought Miss Otis, as she tried to keep her expression respectfully bland.

"If you could rouse her interest . . ." suggested the doctor, gazing sternly down upon Miss Otis.

"I try," she said.

God knows how she tried—walks, rides, TV, conversation, weaving, braiding, embroidery, beading. She had tried until she was blue in the face. She'd start Mrs. Roydan out on a project—weaving, say—simple weaving, show her how.

"There now," she'd say, "do you think you can do it?" whereupon Mrs. Roydan would nod her head or say, "Yes," if she was in the mood to articulate. And she could do it. She'd weave away until Miss Otis relaxed her vigilance and picked up a book and—*wham!*—she'd glance up and there would be Mrs. Roydan, doing nothing except look superior. It was maddening. Miss Otis couldn't get a damn minute of time to herself.

The days became a pattern of getting Mrs. Roydan up in the morning. "Rise and shine now—what a lovely, lovely, lovely day!"

This as she pulled the draperies to the sun and prepared breakfast—scrambled

eggs and bacon or fried sausage and pancakes for herself, always with dry toast, coffee and orange juice for Mrs. Roydan, who wanted it that way, asked for it (she could talk when she wished to talk) and who ate the dry toast delicately, sipped the coffee and orange juice without expression as she stared at Miss Otis, who wolfed her food with relish and gained weight.

Then a walk in the park . . . "Oh, look at the ducks on the water!" and, "See the dog . . ." Often, a side trip to the little rental library in the mall, where Miss Otis sat Mrs. Roydan in a chair by the door

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and browsed among the mysteries, sometimes becoming so engrossed with looking, and so elated with selecting that she wandered off, an open book in her hand, completely forgetting her charge until called back to pick her up and lead her home.

The only time Miss Otis had to herself—*really* to herself—was when the hairdresser shampooed, set and dried Mrs. Roydan's hair in her sitting room or manicured her nails—or when Mrs. Roydan was in bed asleep. Then, and only then, could Miss Otis draw a free breath and think of this life as *hers*, this apartment as *hers*, the tapestries, Limoges china, Meissen procelains and the ivories under glass domes—*all* hers—the velvets, the silk brocades, the silver, the bronze and the crystal.

In the beginning, Miss Otis knew only that she lived in a setting almost as elegant as the old fashioned movie theatre lobbies, so opulently decked with guilded cherubs and dripping glass prisms.

But then, she started riffling through some of the books in the library, most of them on subjects dry as dust, except for the arty ones from which she learned that she was surrounded by treasures far more valuable than those displayed in any old movie theatre lobby.

It was after she learned that the big blue vase with while sculptured overlay was Wedgewood—she'd always thought of Wedgewood as the name of a kitchen range!—and the lamp base cloisonné, that she began to study and apprise and appraise, and squirrel away small objects that might be jade, Parian or onyx, little bitty things that would not be missed from all the others and could be held in the palm of her hand, conveyed to her room, wrapped in tissue and slipped beneath her underthings in the dresser drawer.

She did not know what she would ever do with her goodies—except now and then, when she thought forward to a time when she might no longer be with Mrs. Roydan and could bring them out and gloat and say to friends and neighbors (like Miss Margage), "This piece is jade, called *Stone of Heaven*, very precious . . ." She turned cold as the jade itself as the thought of the dull and tasteless room she would surely be living in, at that future time, where these lovely ornaments would look out of place.

Well, so what could happen that she would no longer be with Mrs. Roydan? Her death? She looked at Mrs. Roydan's still-firm skin and slim strong body, and resolved to keep her

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well so that she could continue on here—and try, for goodness sake, to find an occupational therapy that would truly keep her occupied and her eyes on her occupation, leaving Miss Otis free to really live, pretending that this was all hers, the life, the TV, the books, the brandy, china, silver, bronze and crystal. All hers—hers alone.

It was no easy task to find an occupational therapy that would keep Mrs. Roydan's eyes to herself, but Miss Otis did get one problem solved during one of Mrs. Roydan's son's flying visits to his mother. Miss Otis brought up the Volkswagon and how beat up it was and how uncomfortable his mother was in it. He got the hint immediately and said why shouldn't she drive the Continental? Go ahead, have it serviced and send all the bills to him, as usual.

So she took Mrs. Roydan on short smooth drives through the city, easing it slowly past her old apartment house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Miss Margate going up or down the cracked grimy stairs.

But the only time she did see her and leaned heavily on the horn button, Miss Margate never hesitated her upward plod, never turned a hair! Miss Otis was so angry that, with her hand still on the horn button, she almost rear-ended a suddenly-braked car just ahead.

Swerving barely in time and lifting her hand from the horn button, she felt Mrs. Roydan's disdainful eyes upon her and became aware of Mrs. Roydan's contemputously curled lip—just as if she *knew* Miss Otis wanted to show herself off in the Continental to Miss Margate—just as if she *knew*, with her brain all but frozen by the stroke.

That evening, Miss Otis whisked a small ivory fisherman from a displayed clutter of ivories, wrapped it in tissue, concealed it in her personal drawer and felt better.

She had, Miss Otis kept reminding herself, a nice plushy life—the Continental, the apartment, the steaks, the brandy, the cushions and the secret drawer of tissue-wrapped treasures. Who could ask for more? she asked herself. But it wasn't more she was asking for, it was less.

Less of Mrs. Roydan—Mrs. Roydan who was always there, lording it over her possessions, making Miss Otis feel inferior—always waiting to be waited on, waiting to be led downstairs and into the Continental, waiting to be walked through the park and into the mall, waiting to have her hands

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placed on needlework, beadwork, weaving, or some damn therapeutical occupation that she would not stick at once Miss Otis tried to live her own life for a moment in front of this TV or with a book.

Then Miss Otis found it—the interest to occupy Mrs. Roydan! She found it quite by accident and considered it a good sign that she had unselfishly steered Mrs. Roydan on past the rental library before leading her back to the apartment. There, sandwiched between a tearoom and a dress shop was an art supply store. On impulse, Miss Otis ordered everything available for a hopefully diligent therapeutic occupation.

Mrs. Roydan evinced only a neutral watchfulness as Miss Otis arranged the easel and the box of oils on a tray. It was not until she had squeezed a color, then another, on the palette, had mixed the two together with the palette knife and made her first brushstroke on the canvas that she became industriously absorbed and Miss Otis knew she had it made at last.

She then dumped Mrs. Roydan, easel, canvas, palette, palette knife, brushes and box of tube colors in Mrs. Roydan's sitting room and let her at it.

Now the apartment belonged to Miss Otis—the television set, the silver, bronze and crystal, the exquisite accouterments. She sank in the velvet cushions and relaxed before the color TV, she floated about the rooms, stroking ivory and porcelian.

Her days began the same as ever, with the sun and a cheery, "Rise and shine, what shall we wear this morning?" It was after breakfast that Miss Otis fantasized and dreamed and read of murder at leisure on velvet and watched the game shows in color and nibbled on pastry, with dutiful hourly breaks to visit the sitting room and comment brightly on vapid, monochromatic paintings of nothing.

Miss Otis, being a good if acquisitive nurse-companion, still took Mrs. Roydan for short drives in the Continental, for the Continental was sheer delight, and for walks in the park and strolls through the mall to the rental library and the newest mystery novel; often continuing on to the art supply store, Mrs. Roydan had become insistent in her apathetic fashion, for additional tubes of the dull colors she used up so quickly and for more and more canvases to paint more and more pictures of nothing.

As soon as Mrs. Roydan's son observed his mother's entranced attention on her pallid and

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tiresomely identical canvases, he ceased his already irregular flying visits from halfway across the country.

He sprinkled Miss Otis, during his last trip, with carefully worded phrases of praise and, relieved at being able to cast off his burden of long-distance and time-consuming responsibility, promised vague promises that offered her a world beyond tiny tissue-wrapped treasures and fondled possessions that did not belong to her.

"Miss Otis," said Mrs. Roydan's son, observing his mother at the easel, "you have given her an interest."

"Miss Otis," he promised, "if you will stay with her always. All this will be yours."

Miss Otis stood with clasped hands. "All this?" she breathed.

"Miss Otis," Mrs. Roydan's son enlarged, "I will see that you are well provided for. All I ask is that you stay with my mother."

Well! Once Mrs. Roydan's son had flown away, Miss Otis worked this promise around her tongue and through her mind. She touched the ivories, the bronzes, the jade and silver. She stroked the velvet, repeating the words to herself *These things are mine!* In qualification, she shifted to, *These things may be mine.*

Finally, yet tentatively, she made her decision. *These things will be mine if Mrs. Roydan would only die!*

She felt an anticipatory tingle touch her spine just before shame at such a thought fluttered her hands and sent her, at a ponderous trot, to the sitting room. There she exclaimed with extravagance over Mrs. Roydan's current painting that looked exactly like all the others stacked against the wall.

She continued to take good care of Mrs. Roydan, to rise-and-shine her into her clothes, to prepare her dry-toast breakfast, order her luncheon salad, her steak for dinner—thinking, now and then, how people sometimes chocked on toast or sucked a shred of lettuce into the trachea or swallowed a piece of meat into the esophagus.

She found herself wondering, during their drives, about accidents—minor accidents, of course, nothing to cause injury to the Continental or herself, but startling enough to toss Mrs. Roydan into another and final stroke. In the park too, during their walks together, while she caroled her suggestion to look at the ducks or the children, she pondered the depth of the pool, just as she thought of rabies when she

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asked Mrs. Roydan to see the dog.

Miss Otis did everything she was supposed to do, including hourly breaks to peek into the sitting room and make sure Mrs. Roydan was still there before her easel, painting gray strokes on canvas, absorbed and contented. But she now dreamed of a future less uncertain and more assured than before—a future filled with beauty, comfort and luxury but without Mrs. Roydan—and how it could be attained.

She continued to squirrel away small objects of art, just in case, but less often—while she thought of methods of doing away with Mrs. Roydan. Not murder—heavens, no! But accidents that might happen to anyone—especially to a stroke victim whose reactions were slowed. Miss Otis thought and thought of falls from the window, falls down the stairs, heart failure due to shock. she thought only of occurences that might accidentally bring death—she never thought of causing them. Good grief, no!

But, thinking of them, Mrs. Roydan became the victim in each mystery she read, and Miss Otis became the killer. She took to checking out the final chapter of each book before selecting it to read, and if it appeared to contain a perfect crime, that was for her. Or if, as she scanned the final pages, it seemed that the killer was to get away with his crime but for one teeny-weeny mistake—that, too, was for her so that she could discover which teeny-weeny mistake to avoid.

These mental exercises did not deter Miss Otis from her functional duties as nurse-companion. She ordered the hairdresser, directed the cleaning woman, wrote regular reports to Mrs. Roydan's son, walked her charge in the park to see the ducks and dogs and to the art store for dull tube colors.

Mrs. Roydan still painted wide weary sweeps of gray, brown and black, but she had begun to dip into some of the brigher, lighter shades. Miss Otis did not notice this change, a sign of progress in her patient—the dots of color were so minute they escaped the incurious glances that accompanied her clarion calls of approbation.

Each finished canvas now carried these tiny splotches of color in their darkest corner—jade-green, ivory-white, silver-crystal—like a signature. Wee treasure-tones of color, they grew in number with each small gift Miss Otis wrapped in tissue and donated to her personal drawer.

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Miss Otis gobbled her pancakes and sausages, savored her filet and sipped her brandy, so busy with delighting in taste and flavor that she was no longer offended by Mrs. Roydan's chilling gaze of contempt. She walked the park lightly and spoke brightly of ducks and dogs, failing to notice that Mrs. Roydan's chill disdain had grown to active hatred.

She chattered Mrs. Roydan into the Continental, trotted her to the rental library, without once realizing that the gray eyes upon her had turned stormy, filled with a growing anger. She allowed Mrs. Roydan to roam the art store, to look at the palette knives and ask about their sharpness.

"They're not supposed to be sharp," explained the clerk. "They're only for mixing paint. Now, if you want something sharp, for marking or engraving, a stylus would be your best bet." Miss Otis was indifferent to the purchase of styluses, straight and sharp, long and hooked, as she stood waiting at the counter, engrossed in her newly selected detective novel.

Squirreling away small bits of beauty, just in case, and reading of and planning an accidental murder, she was unaware of the hatred in Mrs. Roydan's no longer cold gray eyes and of the colorful dots on Mrs. Roydan's passively dull canvases.

Instead, she wrote regimented reports to Mrs. Roydan's son as to Mrs. Roydan's progress which had attained a plateau, she explained, a better-than-could-have-been-expected plateau, and unless his mother suffered another stroke—God-forbid—this would be her ordered and reasonably satisfactory existence and he hadn't a thing to worry about, Miss Otis was there on the job.

Miss Otis read many clever plots involving poisoned darts, snake venom, gunshot wounds and asphyxiation—but, having no dart or poison, snake or gun, or even gas in this all-electric apartment, she returned to thoughts of shock and a fatal stroke.

How in the world could she shock stroke victim whose starter valve seemed to be stuck in an unshockable position?

Miss Otis pondered the problem and while she pondered and read and stroked treasures and watched color TV and ripped off a small golden plaque, Mrs. Roydan mixed yellow, burnt umber and a bit of ocher with a tiny touch of green to achieve the color of gold which she added to the signature dots

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in the dark corner of her latest painting.

Then, in the center, she began her figure.

This figure, placed on the cloudlike gray of the background, came out dumpy and fat and dressed in white.

It was the first time Mrs. Roydan had attempted such an art form and she bent close to her work in deep absorption, never noticing Miss Otis' duty visits with their high trill of encouragement, just as Miss Otis never noticed that Mrs. Roydan was painting a figure in white.

Mrs. Roydan left the face of the figure till the last. She worked hard on the features and seemed satisfied once she had finished and sat back to survey the vapid face she had painted with the false and silly smile on the lips and the glint of greed in the stupid blue eyes.

Mrs. Roydan smiled for the first time since her stroke.

She picked up a tube of crimson lake she had not yet used, and squeezed a patch of it on her palette. She dipped in her brush and splotched the bright color on the white of her figure. Then, carefully, using the straight, sharp stylus, she placed dots of the red beyond the splotch on white, and using the hooked stylus, she added a comma to each dot and turned them all into splashed blood drops.

Then Mrs. Roydan wiped the ends of each stylus clean, laid aside her palette and her paint cloth and turned on her chair, a glinting stylus in each hand, waiting for Miss Otis to enter the door of the sitting room.

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BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

Even without a sense of sight, Professor Hartman was able to put together enough clues to run down a would-be blackmailer and get the Dean out of a hole.

by JOHN F. DOBBYN

THE DEAN COULD FEEL one of those involuntary shivers run from his toes to the top of his spine as he pushed the buzzer for the fifth time. He wondered if it was caused by the October chill or the ordeal of violating his pride in exposing his personal life and asking for help. The sixth buzz brought stumbling sounds from the other side of the door that was opened a crack to reveal the groggy, sleep-wrinkled face of Professor Hart.

"Henry, I realize that nine-thirty in the morning is an inconvenience for you, but I'd honestly appreciate a few minutes for something that simply can't wait."

Professor Hart responded with the faint smile of the newly-awakened and a welcoming sweep of the hand. As the Dean passed him, the smile became contemplative. In His majestic wisdom, God had carefully programmed relief from the congested traffic patterns of an overcrowded planet by afflicting half of humanity with a love for the early morning hours, while the other half preferred to deny that they even existed. Why was it so consis-

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tently members of the former group, like the Dean, who discombobulated the plan?

The dean found an appropriate chair, and Professor Hart threaded his way to the coffee pot with the deftness that comes of years of self-sufficiency without the sense of sight.

"Why don't you tell me about it while the coffee brews, Dean?

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Offhand, I'd guess that something came in this morning's mail disturbing enough to cause you to leave breakfast and come directly to my rooms without even stopping at your office. I might even guess that it's not directly connected with school business."

"As a matter of fact, I *did* interrupt breakfast, and I'd *welcome* a cup of coffee, but how did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"You're something of a creature of habit, Dean. I've noticed at morning faculty meetings that you probably follow the routine of eating breakfast and then brushing your teeth and using an expensive cologne. I say that, because I've noticed the aroma of good cologne, unblemished by the odor of coffee, on your breath in the morning.

"This morning I sense the odor of coffee, but no trace of the cologne. Something must have disturbed you at breakfast enough to disrupt the routine. That would also be just about the time of the mail delivery in this neighborhood. It probably had no direct bearing on school business or it would have come to your office or arrived in campus mail in the afternoon.

"I was sure that you came directly from home when I heard you set down your briefcase. You're not the type to carry excess luggage and you could easily have dropped it off at your office down the street unless something drove you to see me as soon as possible. You see how the magician becomes a very ordinary person when he gives away his tricks?"

"You still qualify as a magician with me, Henry. As a matter of fact, I'm counting on your powers of deduction as much as your faithfulness in keeping a confidence. I'll get right to the point. This envelope just arrived in the mail. It contains a sheet of white paper with words cut out of a magazine and pasted on to form a message. I'll give it to you in a minute, but first let me read it to you.

" 'Dear Dean—Your years as dean are over. You will resign within five days or the penalty you will reap for your misdeeds will be the letter I will mail to the administration. Your reputation will be as black as your affair with that student.' Signed—

'A Determined Citizen'

"I want to tell you at the outset, Henry, that the allegation regarding the young lady was true until yesterday. I don't know how I was foolish enough to become involved, but what's done is done. During the first three weeks of our association, I was cautious enough to keep the matter private.

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"Then, yesterday, I made the abysmal error of taking Miss—the student in question—to my club for lunch. I made arrangements for a small private dining room. Just as we were in what you might call a compromising situation, I heard the door to the room open. It closed before I could see who had opened it, and I could just hear padded footbeats running down the corridor.

"It was enough to bring me back to reality. I realized the potential for harm to both of our interests, so I ended the relationship once and for all. Then this came in the morning mail."

He handed the note and envelope to Professor Hart, who slowly and methodically traced every feature with fingers like probes. When he had finished, he rested his head against the high-backed chair and closed lids over sightless eyes to intensify his concentration. In a few minutes he spoke.

"Let me describe someone to you, Dean. I'd like to know if it calls anyone you might know to mind. I'm picturing a woman, probably in her thirties or early forties—neat, well-groomed, careful about her appearance. She's fairly well-educated, at least through college. She's definitely athletic and probably spends a good bit of her time playing tennis. She's not wealthy, but on the other hand she's not worried about her next meal. I imagine she'd be in the low-middle income range. I believe she also has some sort of connection with the university."

The dean thought for a moment.

"As a matter of fact, that perfectly describes four women who play bridge together every afternoon at the Faculty Club. They're all wives of professors. They come to play golf or tennis in the morning, then get together for lunch and bridge before going home in the afternoon. Now that I think of it, each of their husbands would stand to move up a notch if I were to be replaced as dean."

"Do they leave the club at any particular time in the afternoon?"

"Yes—generally about four-thirty."

"Then I'd like you to do something, Dean. There are just a couple of pieces missing from the puzzle, and I think I can find them at the club if you'll meet me there at exactly four-fifteen this afternoon."

"I appreciate this more than you can imagine, Henry. I'll be there. Before I get back to business, could you tell me how you put together that description?"

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"It's all a matter of deduction and probabilities, Dean. When I lost my sight, I began noticing a world of details I was never aware of before. Then I developed the technique of deducing the most probable cause for each detail, and I found that I could read volumes in a sheet of paper like this that seems to tell practically nothing to most people with sight.

"For example, feel this envelope you just handed me. If you move your fingers very slowly and gently over the typewritten letters in the address, you can tell that it was typed on a mechanical rather than an electric typewriter, because the characters are uneven in depth. With a little training and concentration, you could also tell that the characters typed with one hand were struck with noticeably more force than those struck with the other.

"That suggests this envelope was addressed by someone who probably engages in an activity where one hand or arm is used predominantly.

"Now, look at the sheet of paper with the message on it. First of all, since I lost the sense of sight, I seem to have developed a hyper-sensitive sense of smell. The first thing I detected was a faint trace of inexpensive perfume. That suggests our writer is a woman—and when you consider the types of activities that generally cause a woman to develop considerably more strength in one hand than the other, the most obvious probability is tennis. We can also conclude, from the inference that she can afford to play tennis but uses inexpensive perfume and a mechanical typewriter, that she's in a lower-middle income bracket.

"Now, look at the pasted-on words. I can tell by the texture of the pieces of paper that they were cut from one of the glossy magazines that write for a college-educated audience. I place her in her thirties or early forties, because the choice of words in the message doesn't strike me as that of a woman in her twenties or under—and if she plays tennis regularly, she's probably this side of her late forties.

"Then, finally, you can't help noticing the neatness of the scissor-cuts and the arrangement of the words. That kind of neatness and attention to detail generally runs deep in the personality and shows up in a neat, well-groomed appearance.

"The final part was easy. The university got a package deal a few years ago whereby it orders all of its paper supplies from a particular wholesaler in Texas.

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I could tell the feel of that paper immediately, and it suggests our lady author has a direct or indirect connection with the school for purposes of supplying her personal needs for stationary."

"That's incredible, Henry! But how can you be sure of *any* of those points?"

"I can't. But experience has shown me that if I have enough details to work with, and if I play the probabilities, I'll arrive at the right over-all conclusion even if I'm off-base on a point or two. I might also mention that I'm afflicted with an ingrained sense of showmanship, and I have one important key to this puzzle that I think I'll keep to myself until the finale at the club this afternoon."

At exactly four-fifteen that afternoon, the dean was at the door of the Faculty Club to meet Professor Hart as he stepped out of a cab.

"Are the ladies playing bridge, Dean?"

"It's business as usual."

"Good! Then I want you to take me to their table and introduce me, so that I can shake hands with each one individually. Stay right by my side and just do everything I ask. Shall we go?"

WHEN THE TWO MEN reached the bridge table, each of the four ladies took time to render a politic greeting to the dean of their husbands' department. The dean followed instructions to the letter, guiding Professor Hart around the table so that he could exchange a few words and shake hands with each of the four.

The women seemed to welcome the chance to ask Professor Hart about recent criminal investigations in which his assistance to the police had been reported in the news media. The professor was the soul of charm, graciously filling in details that had been overlooked in print. At four-thirty, one of the women checked her watch.

"I hate to leave a fascinating conversation, but I have a hungry family due home. We haven't even had a chance to see any of your famous powers of deduction in action. Professor Hart."

"I wouldn't want to disappoint you, ladies. Perhaps we could arrange a small demonstration. Would each of you put your coat check in the middle of the table? Now, would one of you please mix up the checks and hand them all to me in any order? Dean, if I could take your arm, would you show me to the coat-check counter?"

The professor handed the checks to the coatroom attendant and had all four of the

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coats placed on the counter together. He then picked up one of the coats and, holding it open, called one of the four women by name, assisting her into the coat. He did the same with the second, third and fourth coats, in each case matching the coat with the right owner, to the astonishment of his small audience. He sidestepped the predictable questions of how he had done it with allusions to the magician's code of not revealing trade secrets. In a few minutes, the chatter of speculations was muted as the front door of the club closed.

"And that, Dean, is that. I doubt you'll hear any more from your friendly neighborhood blackmailer. I think we've earned a martini in the cocktail lounge."

The dean guided the blind man to a table in the rear of the club lounge and brought them each a drink. He was hardly seated before he pressed the professor for the details.

"What did you do, Henry? I was right there, and I didn't see a thing."

"First of all, I know which of the four it was. Do you want me to tell you, Dean?"

"No. As long as you think it's over, I'd rather *not* know. It would just prejudice me whenever I had to deal with her husband. I'll simply see to it that none of them ever has occasion to compromise me in the future. But how could you tell which one it was?"

"First, I was looking for a tennis player because of the uneven strength in her hands on the keys of the typewriter. Since one of the four is a golfer, I could eliminate her immediately. Golfers tend to develop strength fairly equally in both hands.

"Secondly, the point I omitted when we talked this morning was that our blackmailer has to be left-handed. The words on the notes were individually cut from a magazine with scissors. The ridges left by the cuts indicated that each word was cut out in a clockwise motion. Only someone left-handed would cut paper that way.

"To confirm it, the letters typed with the left hand were struck much harder than those typed with the right. Once I knew that, I simply used that little coat trick to see which lady or ladies would put the left arm in first when I helped her on with her coat. It turned out to be only one of the four."

"That's beautifully simple, Henry. If you don't mind divulging one more secret, how could you tell which coat went with which woman?"

"Perfume. When you intro-

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duced me to each woman, I made it a point to associate her name with the scent she was wearing. Then I could simply call the name that went with the scent which had rubbed off on each of their coats. Incidentally, as a backstop on my deductions, I noticed that only the lady in question was wearing the same brand of perfume I noticed on the blackmail note."

"I guess that nails it down."

"I'd stake my reputation on it, Dean. I might have missed a point or two, but the pattern is conclusive. I'd also bet that that will be the last you'll hear of the incident. Once this kind of amateur blackmailer loses the cover of secrecy, she invariably pulls in her claws. I think you're free to enjoy your martini and relax."

In the club parking lot, each of the four women had gone to her own car. One of the four reached into her coat pocket for keys, and was surprised to find a folded piece of white paper. She opened it with some astonishment to find the same piece of paper she had sent to the Dean, but with the cut-out words rearranged and pasted in a pattern to read—

Dear Citizen—Your misdeeds are over. The penalty you will reap for blackmail will be five years.

A Determined Dean.

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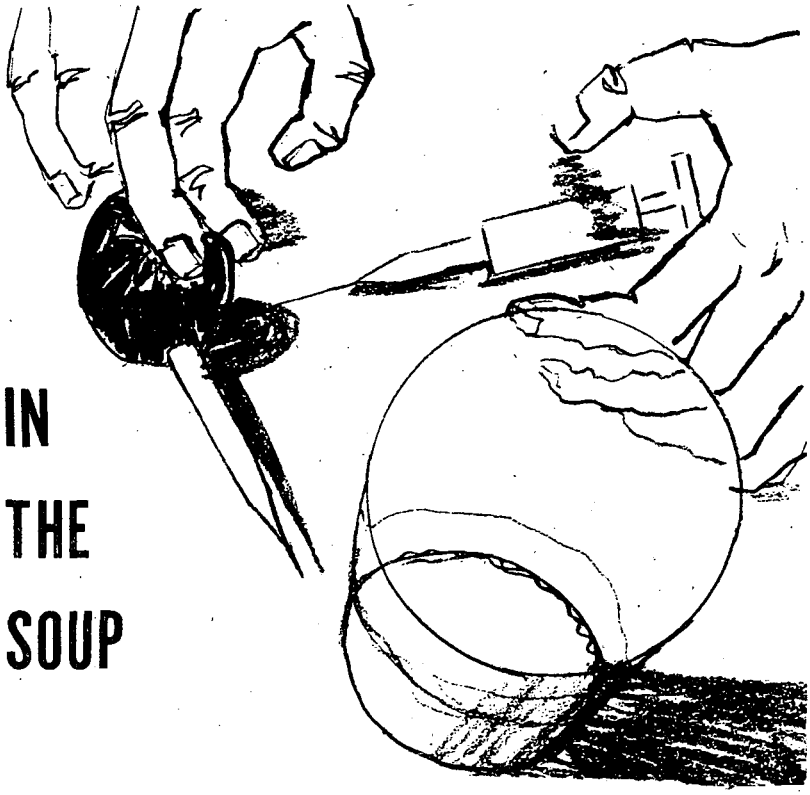

IN THE SOUP

by

JAMES HOLDING

Like every successful pharmacist, Henry was very, very careful —especially in poisoning his wife.

IT HAS BEEN SAID that a drowning man, in the microseconds before his struggles end forever, experiences vivid flashbacks of memory in which the chief events of his life are rapidly paraded before his dying eyes.

Henry Cameron had frequently heard this old wives' tale yet had never, for a single moment—practical, hard-headed man that he was—taken any stock in it whatsoever. Never, that is, until it actually happened to him as he put down his spoon beside his

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plate at dinner one Wednesday evening.

Even then, forced against his will to admit the existence of the phenomenon, Henry thought with meager satisfaction that it wasn't the way it was supposed to be at all.

For one thing, he wasn't drowning. That was obvious. Furthermore, the recapitulation of his past did not begin, as was commonly believed, with Henry's infancy or childhood or adolescence. The initial scene in Henry's memory parade was one in which he was already a mature and handsome adult who had been married to Lisa for some years and who had already made his mark in his profession as chief pharmacist of a local six-store chain of prescription drug stores. Henry worked in the largest and newest of these stores on East Carson Street. It was a mental picture of his prescription department there that first flashed into his mind in the runthrough of his past.

He saw himself quite clearly standing at the back of his laboratory, a man of middle height, with darkly saturnine good looks, hands like a concert painist's and a calm deliberate way of moving that verged on the lethargic. He was dressed in his white work-smock and was applying, with infinite care, the sharp edge of a razor blade to the wrap-around label on a can of condensed tomato soup.

Tomato soup was his wife's favorite. She esteemed it above chicken, mushroom, vegetable, beef or any of the other varieties of soup available at the supermarket. Invariably, she began her frugal luncheon at home alone with a cup of it, considering it exactly the preprandial fillip required to add flavor to the simple sandwich or salad to follow.

That was why Henry Cameron chose tomato soup as a fitting instrument with which to murder his wife.

There was another reason, too. It was simply this—that Henry wanted to murder his wife in a manner as quick, pleasant and, yes, compassionate as possible—if such terms can be properly used in connection with such a project.

The truth was, that although Henry could contemplate with equanimity the killing of his wife, nevertheless he wanted her to be happy when she died—as he was sure she would be if she were engaged at the time in downing a cup of her beloved tomato soup with her customary enjoyment.

Lisa had not for two years now been a wife to Henry in the true sense of the word.

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Beautiful, accomplished, gracious, affectionate she still was—but in matters of love, what had begun as an attractive timidity on her part during their honeymoon had since become what Henry could only characterize as downright indifference to him—even revulsion. This attitude, Henry felt with some justice, was not only unfair and unbecoming in the wife of a handsome and successful pharmacist, but utterly intolerable.

His first attempt to solve his problem with Lisa had taken the form of Carol Ann Gormely, a lovely clerk who toiled behind the cosmetics counter in his own store.

Carol Ann was lonely, having but recently been transferred from the West End store to the East Carson Street branch where Henry labored. She was a candid, outgoing, impulsive girl, abrim with energy and amiability. Basically she was very responsive to men—she found Henry's mildly satanic mien and manner, fetchingly set off by his white work smock, quite appealing. After numerous meetings with him—some casual, some arranged—she offered no very violent objections when Henry pleaded with her to console him occasionally for his wife's lack of understanding. She agreed to serve, one might say, as a surrogate wife.

In this capacity, Carol Ann turned out to be a joy. With her gayety, her innocent enthusiasms, her charm, her beguiling mind and bewitching body, she very soon supplanted Henry's wife, Lisa, in his affections. This occurred all the more readily as Lisa's distaste for any physical expression of Henry's feelings became steadily stronger and more obvious. Even a husbandly kiss, a tender pat on the hip when Henry returned home from the store, made Lisa wince.

She tried unsuccessfully to conceal this from her husband—and Henry, who was not without his share of healthy male ego, soon came to realize that Lisa's revulsion was not for him alone but for all men alike. Poor Lisa! She could scarcely shake hands with a male guest, or brush against a man in an elevator, without that same shrinking reaction.

The more Henry found himself in love with Carol Ann, the more impatient he felt with Lisa. Yet Carol Ann so skillfully soothed his troubled spirit, so fully satisfied his persistent need for sympathetic female companionship, that Henry gave the matter of his wife little thought for a time, living in

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a world of his own in which he found ever more numerous excuses to consort, however briefly, with Carol Ann.

Such a euphoric state of affairs could not possibly last, of course. Inevitably Carol Ann, despite her natural cheerfulness, began to weary somewhat of being merely a surrogate wife. Once she even heard herself wishing out loud in Henry's presence that she might someday be the *real* Mrs. Henry Cameron, and not merely Henry's lovely little counter clerk as he fondly called her—the girl who worked beside him every day, but slept beside him only once in a while, and then only in deepest secrecy.

"That," she remarked vehemently to Henry one evening while hugging his dark head to her bosom, "is no way for a girl to live, lover boy, is it?"

Henry was forced to agree, upon thinking it over in his deliberate way. He couldn't blame Carol Ann for feeling as she did. For several months thereafter his manner, both in the drug store and at home with Lisa, was that of a man sorely bedeviled by worrisome thoughts.

During this period of restless brooding, Henry reached his decision. Lisa must be got rid of to make room for Carol Ann. The simple and obvious expedient—divorce—was denied him. Lisa was unalterably opposed to divorce, he knew, because of her religion. Therefore, Henry told himself stolidly, he must kill his wife. There was no other solution.

But how should he kill her? She was not to blame for her marital shortcomings. Poor Lisa! She was probably as bitterly unhappy in their marriage as he was. So he must not plan to kill her in any unkind, unpleasant or lingering way. No, she must be done to death in some fashion which would leave her happy to the last.

This sentiment did Henry credit, of course, yet it posed a problem for him as well. What method of murder would prove pleasant for Lisa, yet quick and sure also? That was the question that nagged at him for several days.

The "quick" and "sure" requirements occasioned him no difficulty. Was he not, after all, an accomplished graduate of a reputable school of pharmacy, with all the recondite knowledge implied by that background? Did he not have access, by both direct and devious means, to lethal substances perfectly capable of causing quick and certain death?

Yes, he did. Hence it was an almost ludicrously simple matter for him to secure a culture

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of botulism bacteria and load a steel-tipped hypodermic syringe with the deadly stuff. Once this preliminary step was accomplished, he turned to consideration of how to introduce his does of quick and certain death into the alimentary canal of Lisa without her knowledge.

As we have seen, his ruminations on that aspect of his problem led to the simple solution—tomato soup. His wife's favorite. Invariably ingested before lunch. And the perfect agent of death from quite another angle as well. Tomato soup would make Lisa's death, to all appearances, an accident, totally unrelated to Henry himself. The fault, if any, would be laid directly at the door of the food processing company that had carelessly sealed up lethal Clostridium Botulinus toxin in a can of condensed tomato soup.

With infinite care, Henry made a half-inch cut with his razor blade in the top edge of the wrap-around paper soup label. At the cut, he peeled a corner of the paper downward gently, bending it back. This done, he took up his steel-tipped syringe full of bacteria botulin, jabbed the point of the syringe neatly through the wall of the can in the spot uncovered by the folded-back label corner and depressed the plunger.

When the deadly hypodermic injection had entered the soup paste within the can, he withdrew the syringe, applied a tiny piece of scotch tape over the pinhole in the can, then carefully sealed the turned-down label back into place with another morsel of transparent tape. Now, even to the sharpest eye, can and label appeared untouched.

That evening, Henry took the doctored can of tomato soup home with him in his briefcase. By good fortune, Lisa was planting amaryllis bulbs in the back yard when he got home, thus affording him opportunity to place his can of soup among the other cans in Lisa's kitchen storage cabinet unseen. The can of soup was an unremarkable addition to a shelf already bearing several dozen cans of various kinds of soup including, of course, a preponderance of Lisa's favorite variety.

That was on a Tuesday evening.

In a way, Henry enjoyed the days of suspense that followed. Each evening, when he returned from work, he called out cheerily to Lisa to announce his arrival. If Lisa answered him, he knew at once that he must wait at least one more day before married bliss could become possible for him and his little counter girl, Carol Ann. One

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evening, when Lisa failed to answer his home-coming hail, Henry's heart leaped into his throat and the hairs on the back of his neck tingled. His elation was premature, however. He found Lisa, alive and well, watering her amaryllis in the back yard.

To Carol Ann, of course, on the infrequent occasions when he was with her during this period of waiting, he said nothing of his plans and hopes for their future together. He wanted Carol Ann to be totally surprised when Lisa's sudden and unexpected death should make him free to marry again.

Thus, for eight days, Henry waited patiently for the imponderable workings of chance to direct Lisa's hand to his own particular can of tomato soup on the well-stocked shelf.

Wednesday evening, returning home from work, Henry called out as usual to Lisa. She answered him with a cheery "Hi, dear! I'm in the kitchen."

Lisa was at the stove. He made a half-hearted pass at her cheek, scoring a clean miss. "What's for dinner?"

"Chili," she replied. "Tossed salad. French bread. Chocolate ice cream and cookies for dessert. Did you have a hard day?"

"About the usual," he said. "How about you?"

"I went out for lunch for a change—with Pauline Grant. We went to the Sea Food bar and had clam chowder and oysters on the half-shell." She smiled at him. "We each had a martini before lunch, too."

He said, "Well, a martini before lunch makes more sense than your eternal tomato soup."

Lisa carried the bowls of chili into the dining room. Henry sat down at the table. He sniffed as he picked up his spoon. "It smells good, Lisa. You always could make good chili."

"This is a little different," Lisa said. "Pauline told me a new way to make it."

Henry took a spoonful. "It's great," he said. "What's different about Pauline's recipe?"

Henry took a spoonful of the chili and nodded. "It's great," he said. "What's different about Pauline's recipe?"

"The sauce. Pauline said a can of tomato soup in it would improve the flavor."

It was a shock, all right. It had not occurred to Henry that soup was anything but soup.

That was the exact instant when the scenes of his life began to flash with incredible speed before Henry's inward eye.

He put down his spoon as the first dreadful strictures began. With agonized intensity, he tried to whisper to Lisa.

But Lisa was not listening.

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THE CLUE TO THE KILLER WAS IN PLAIN SIGHT—IF LOMAN COULD ONLY READ IT.

THE SQUARE ROOT OF DEAD

by MICHAEL KURLAND and RICHARD LUPOFF

The professor was murdered in primitive fashion–stabbed by a sharp instrument. But he left a lead to his murderer behind him worthy of the sophisticated mind of a scientific genius whose job was to teach computers to think.

PROFESSOR HARKER lay in the grotesque, unembarrassed posture of death, his arms sprawled out, his right leg doubled under him, his eyes staring up unblinkingly at the final unknown. He looked mildly surprised, as though this were not the answer he expected.

Lieutenant Loman stood to one side, his ungloved hands thrust under his arms for warmth, and looked at the body while his partner, Sergeant Stametti, and the lab men finished the methodical detail work that had to be completed before the corpse could be moved. They photographed it from all the necessary, undignified angles, dusted all the plausible surfaces for fingerprints—not likely out here in the middle of the snow-covered quadrangle—and conducted a painstaking search

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of the immediate area, bagging whatever they found, no matter how mundane or meaningless: cigaret butts, soda bottles, all the detritus with which the human race clutters up the surface of this planet.

Loman had ruled out anything clearly dropped before the snow started that evening, for which the lab crew was properly grateful. It was evident that, when Professor James Conrad Harker had met his rendezvous with that greater calculus in the sky, the snow had just about stopped falling.

A thin man joined Loman, carefully skirting the yellow rope the lab crew had put up to circle and define the death scene. "You're Lieutenant Loman," the thin man said, extending a gloved hand. "I'm Professor Pyne. If there's any way in which I can help... I mean, I don't know what I could do but—this is startling, you know. I mean..."

"You knew Professor Harker?" Loman asked, looking into Pyne's slightly bulging eyes while he took the offered hand.

"We've been colleagues for over twenty years," Professor Pyne said, shifting his gaze to stare down at the body. "I'm head of the department now. Can't they cover up the body? I mean..."

"What department, Professor?"

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"What? Oh—mathematics. James Conrad Harker was one of the leading algebraic topologists in the country—in the world. Can you tell me what happened to him?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. He appears to have been stabbed, but we don't know as yet with what, by whom or why. Who told *you* about it, Professor, and why did you come down here?"

Pyne bristled. "You don't think—"

"It's my job, Professor," Loman interrupted, "asking questions. I very seldom know the answers in advance or I wouldn't bother asking the question."

"A student—one of Harker's graduate students, actually—called me up and told me about it. I came down because I felt I should. As head of the department, I mean, and his friend. To see if there was anything I could do."

Loman nodded. "Tell me about Professor Harker," he said. "What sort of man was he?"

"Brilliant," Pyne said. "Can we—ah—talk somewhere else?"

"In a minute, Professor." The ambulance had just arrived, and Sergeant Stametti looked over to Loman with a mute question. Loman nodded, and the body was carefully picked up and placed on the stretcher. Now the area under the body would be examined, and Harker's clothing would be cursorily searched, pending the complete examination at the morgue.

"It's Professor Harker's personality I'm interested in," Loman said, leading Pyne away from the scene. "Was he gregarious and friendly, or surly and private? Did he have a temper? Was he the sort of nit-picking pedant who provokes fits of temper in others?"

They walked together toward Euclid Avenue, which bordered the near side of the quadrangle, while Professor Pyne thought that over. It was just after eleven at night, and most of the shops were closed. Two coffee houses were still open, and Loman and Pyne headed into the nearer.

"Professor Harker was a friendly, easygoing man," Pyne said. "He had a variety of interests outside his field, like glass collecting, go, science fiction and heuristic programming techniques."

"*Go?*" Loman asked. "Isn't that a game?"

"Right, Lieutenant. Something like chess, only not."

"And what's this 'heuristic programming'? You mean, computers?"

"That's right. A heuristic

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program is one which, so to speak, allows the computer to learn from experience. Not to make the same mistake twice, I mean."

"I didn't know they could do that," Loman said. "I thought all a computer could do was add and subtract, only incredibly fast."

"That's basically right," Professor Pyne agreed. "That's what makes heuristic programming such a challange. It's like teaching an adding machine to think."

Sergeant Stametti pushed through the door of the coffee shop and hurried over to Loman's table, his feet distributing snow over the hardwood floor as he stamped down the aisle. "Something for you, Lieutenant," he said, setting a small plastic box gently on the table. "Found it under the body. It's one of them hand computers."

"Calculators," Professor Pyne corrected absently, staring with interest at the little mechanism. "It's his—Professor Harker's, I mean. We gave it to him as a sort of joke for his last birthday. He was fifty-five."

"It's lit up," Loman said, looking at the bright, ruby-red number 3 which shone up at him."

"That's why I brought it in to you," Stametti explained. "I doubt if even a math professor would walk around carrying the number three all lit up. I thought it might be a last message, or something."

"A dying message, eh? Why not? I've been on the Homicide Detail for eight years—I deserve a dying message. Tell me, Professor Pyne, does the number three mean anything to you?"

Pyne smiled. "I could probably give you a two-hour lecture on the number three," he said. "But if you mean in specific relation to Professor Harker, no."

"Nothing at *all*, Professor? He wasn't a member of a three-man committee, or holding a three-student class, or maybe on some list where the members are always put in the same order. You know: one, two, three—"

"Not anything meaningful," Pyne said. "Not that I can think of, I mean. Harker does—did—have three graduate student research assistants in his office.

"Were they listed in any order?"

"If so, it would be alphabetical. Let's see; it's Mr. Bliss, Miss Bohle, and Mr. Quipper. And, of course, there's the faculty list for the department. But I believe Harker himself is number three. *Was*."

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"*Great!*" Lieutenant Loman said.

Pyne stared down at the calculator. "Wait a second!" he said. "It might be. . .may I?" he reached for the machine.

Loman pushed it over and watched Professor Pyne as he carefully pushed down the button-switch in the lower right hand corner marked (=). As he did, a whole row of numbers lit up in front of the 3.

"It is as I remembered," Pyne said. "The device automatically suppresses all but the last digit after thirty seconds."

"What for, Professor?" Sgt. Stametti asked, staring curiously at the plastic box.

"To save the battery," Pyne explained. "The thing that draws most of the current in these devices is the lighting display, so many of them are made to suppress the display after thirty seconds except for the last digit to remind you that you're holding a number."

Lieutenant Loman pulled absently at the corners of his trim mustache and examined the number now glowing up at him. It was 2 1 9 8 . 2 1 1 3.

"Could this be a part of some problem that Professor Harker was working on?" he asked.

"I wouldn't thing so," Pyne said. "Topologists don't work with numbers, actually."

"Then why did you get him the calculator?" Loman asked.

"It was sort of a joke," Pyne said. "Professor Harker had an absolute eidetic memory for numbers. He never had to write down addresses or phone numbers. Each number had a separate personality for him. I mean, that's the way he described it. But he absolutely couldn't add or subtract. We got him the calculator to balance his checkbook."

"Phone number, eh?" Loman said. "Maybe. . .no, it's too long."

"Say," Stametti said, "maybe it spells out something, like the name of the guy who attacked him. We didn't find a pen or pencil on him. Maybe this was the professor's only way to name his killer."

"Right," Loman agreed. "Now all we have to do is go up to old two-one-nine-eight and tell him the game's up."

"No, Lieutenant, really. My kid showed me. You can turn the thing upside-down and get words. Here, I'll show you."

"Wait a second," Loman said. He copied the number off the display into his notebook, and then handed the calculator to Stametti.

"Here, look," Stametti said. He cleared the instrument and tapped in 3-2--0-0-8. "*There!*" He handed the calculator back to Lieutenant Loman.

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"So?" Loman asked slowly. He frowned.

"Turn it upside down," Stametti instructed. "Read the dial upside down."

Loman obeyed instructions, and read B-O-O-Z-E in the amber lights. "*Well!*" he said. "Clever. The eight is a 'B' and so forth. Let's see what it says with Professor Harker's number." He reentered the number that had been on the machine and then turned it upside down and stared at the result. "It doesn't mean anything to me," he said finally. "And I really thought we had something for a minute. What do you think, Professor Pyne?"

Pyne examined the upside down display. "E-I-I-Z-point-B—could be an R maybe—I-Z. No, I can't say it means anything to me. Sorry. Frankly, I doubt if it would have occurred to Professor Harker to play that sort of game with his calculator. I mean, he just didn't think that way."

Loman stood up and stuck the little calculator in his pocket. "Thanks for your help, Professor," he said. "Would you please give the full names and addresses of Professor Harker's three research assistants to Sergeant Stametti so he can question them in the morning? I'm going home to bed now so I can dream about numbers."

LIEUTENANT LOMAN didn't see Stametti again until eleven the next morning, when the sergeant slammed into the office in his usual enthusiastic way. "Busy morning," Stametti said. "Got a lot for you. Don't know what good it is, any of it. What're you doing?"

"I borrowed an instruction manual from a store that sells these calculators," Loman said. "I figure that if I know how to work it right, I'll have a better chance of figuring out what in hell Harker was trying to tell us."

"I been thinking about that, Lieutenant," Stametti said. He paused.

"And?" Loman prompted, as Stametti stared morosely down at the instruction book in his hand.

"It don't mean anything, Lieutenant. You'd better give it up and just read my reports when I get them typed up."

Loman and Stametti had a long-established system of working together—Stametti dug up the information and Loman analyzed and interpreted it. Each was particularly good at what he did, and each admired the other for his particular ability. They worked well together.

Lieutenant Loman put the booklet down and leaned back in his wooden swivel chair.

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"Let's hear it, Stametti—why should I give it up?"

"I've been questioning the three grad students and assembling information on their backgrounds," Stametti said, "and it's odds on that one of them did it. All three of them have possible motives, and as far as I can tell they're the only ones. Harker didn't have any money, he didn't have a job anyone else wanted, his wife died three years ago and he hasn't been seeing anyone since, and everyone at the university respected him."

"Good work," Loman said. "Get it typed up and I'll stare at it. Why does that mean that the number on the calculator isn't a dying message? The professor didn't have anything to write with on him when he died."

"He wouldn't be obscure," Stametti said. "He'd have no reason to leave a number with four places on each side of the decimal point. No reason at all."

"Explain."

"Sure. The three research assistants are named Robert Quipper, Jan Bliss and Susan Bohle." Stametti paused expectantly, staring at Loman.

"Go on," Loman said, a trace of annoyance showing in his voice.

"Sure. I thought you'd see it. You can write all three names upside down, like I showed you, on the calculator. Here, look." Stametti picked the calculator up from Loman's desk and tapped 808 into it. Upside down it became BOB. Then he demonstrated how 55178 became BLISS and 37408 reversed to BOHLE.

"I see," Loman said thoughtfully. "So if Harker could name his attacker that easily—"

"Right," Stametti agreed. "He had no reason to leave two-one-nine-eight-point-two-one-one-three as a clue if he could leave an easily understandable eight-o-eight."

"Perhaps Mr. eight-o-eight isn't the killer," Loman suggested. "Or Bliss or Bohle either. Perhaps it's more complex than that. Or, even if you're right about no one else having a reason to eliminate Harker, maybe it was a nut killer."

"If it was a nut killer," Sergeant Stametti said, "then that number is a nut clue, and you'll never figure out what it means." He put the calculator back down on the desk.

Loman shook his head in disgust. "You're probably right," he said. "Go type up those reports and get them to me, so I can get the feel of these three students."

Sergeant Stametti went off to

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his own desk, leaving Loman staring down at the calculator. He punched BOB into the machine and squared it. Then he took the square root of BLISS and the reciprocal of BOHLE, and no matter how long he stared at the results they were merely numbers, nothing more.

About an hour later, slightly after noon, Stametti returned to Loman's desk and flopped a set of typed forms on the battered wood surface in front of the Lieutenant.

"Thanks, Stametti," Loman said. "I'll look at them after lunch. I'm trying to make up the duty roster for next month."

"How'd you get stuck with *that* job?" Stametti asked him.

"You'd better look over the reports now."

"It's the captain's new policy," Loman said. "He believes, all of a sudden, in delegating authority. Why had I better look over the reports now?"

"Because they're all going to be here at one-thirty to talk to you. I thought I told you."

Loman stiffarmed the worksheet to the back of the desk with his right palm. "No, Sergeant," he said, "you didn't mention that."

"I arranged it," Stametti said. "We don't want this case to drag on, so I figured you'd wrap

it up this afternoon after you read my reports."

Loman stared at Stametti, but could make nothing out of his bland expression. "Well then," Loman said, "I guess I'd better get at those reports. All three graduate students are coming at one-thirty?"

"Right. And the professor, too."

"Professor Pyne?"

"Right. *Him*."

"Why?"

"He's a possible. Not a probable, but a possible."

"What's *his* motive?"

"Try professional jealousy. Harker was more highly regarded as a mathematician than Pyne. I have it from the rest of the department. Pyne's been jealous of Harker for twenty years. A thing like that can build up. It sounds like a

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slim motive for murder, but people have been killed for a lot less. Pyne might be slightly batty on the subject."

"Any sign of that?"

"No. Apparently they were good friends. Anything else you want, let me know."

"Ham and swiss on rye toast, light coffee, no sugar—and don't forget the pickle."

"You eating lunch at your desk? I thought we'd go to Pronzini's and have a steak."

"You're the one made the one-thirty appointments. Now let me read these reports and see if I get any bright ideas."

"Right. One ham and swiss on rye." Stametti gave a gesture vaguely reminiscent of a salute and left.

On top of Stametti's stack of papers was the Medical Examiner's preliminary report. The ME confirmed what had been apparent last night. Professor Harker had been killed by a single thrust from a narrow, sharp instrument, which penetrated between the third and fourth ribs, severing the thoracic and carotid arteries, and causing almost immediate death by cutting off the blood supply to the brain. The professor was conscious for no more than a minute or two after the attack.

Just long enough, Loman thought, *to tap out that dying message on his calculator before he fell over. And I have to be smart enough to figure out what he meant. And he was a genius.*

Lieutenant Loman put the Medical Examiner's report aside. Below it were Stametti's reports on the four suspects, based on questioning each of them, and other unverified data gathered that morning in the university's Math Department. He put the four reports side by side on the desk and read them alternately, line by line.

The vital statistics first: name, address, age, sex, phone number, occupation, police record (none admitted to having any—that was being checked), physical description. Then came the statements, which were put into narrative form in the style Loman called "third person police impersonal."

NAME Quipper, Robert L.
AGE 26 SEX M
ADDRESS 3132 Percy Street
PHONE 483-2132

Robert Quipper, the oldest of the three graduate students, had been a sergeant in the army, serving in Southeast Asia, before getting out and letting the government put him through school. He was in the midst of writing his doctoral thesis, and expected to have his degree by the end of the year.

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It was known that he felt Professor Harker had walked off with an original idea of his and developed it without giving Quipper sufficient credit. The consensus in the math department was that what Harker had done was proper, and that the mention of Quipper in Harker's published paper was sufficient. But Quipper had a quick temper, and had previously had several loud arguments with Harker on the subject.

NAME Bliss, Jan (nmi)
AGE 21 SEX M
ADDRESS 661½ Yeath Drive
PHONE 484-8947

Jan Bliss had never known any life except the world of science. A shy, introverted boy, he had turned to the study of the logical, invariable laws of the universe when he found himself unable to understand the whimsical, inconsistant customs of humanity. Normally Jan was quiet to the point of invisibility, although distantly polite if approached. The other students' opinions were that he would like to make friends if he knew how.

On very rare occasions, for no outward reason that anyone could tell, Jan falls into what psychologists call a fugue state, and would walk around as if in a dream, or perhaps visiting some other plane of existence. During these periods he tends to be destructive; at one party he methodically destroyed every salad plate in the house, leaving dinner plates, soup bowls, cups, and glasses untouched.

He was never known to have harmed anyone or even attempted to while in this state. He was seeing a psychiatrist once every two weeks, all he could afford. The psychiatrist would not discuss his patient, but would say that he considered it extremely unlikely Jan could have stuck a knife into Professor James Conrad Harker.

NAME Bohle, Susan S.
AGE 23 SEX F
ADDRESS Rm D-12, 181 Tetra Street
PHONE 480-4896

Susan Bohle was an intelligent, articulate 23-year-old from a well-to-do family, who didn't encourage her choice of careers. Women were supposed to settle down and have children, according to Susan's mother. That being so, Susan's father felt, graduate school was surely a waste of money. College, of course—everybody went to college. But why fool around getting a higher degree when

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you should be out getting a husband?

It was known that Professor Harker espoused similar views. Women belonged in the home, not the graduate school. Certainly no woman could ever hope to be a really top-flight mathematician. Competent, yes, but not genius. As a result of this prejudice, Harker was much harder on women students than on men. He was known to resent the pressure that had been brought to bear to make him take Susan Bohle as a research assistant. Common gossip had it that he was going to ease Susan out as quickly and as gracefully as possible with the Masters degree that, in this university, meant you weren't quite good enough to make your PhD.

Susan, who was a really brilliant student with an original mind, would have no trouble getting her doctorate from whichever professor took Harker's place as her major professor. She was also very stubborn and tough-minded. She would have to be to buck her parents and her major professor and get this far. Was she tough-minded enough to stick a knife in Harker?

STAMETTI DELIVERED the sandwich, and Lieutenant Loman paused long enough to eat half before turning the reports over and reading the suspects' statements as to where they had been when Professor Harker was murdered.

None of them had what you'd call an alibi. Robert Quipper had been home brushing up for the calculus course he was a teaching assistant in, half-expecting Professor Harker to call and make arrangements to talk over a paper they were preparing. The professor had never called.

Jan Bliss had been out at a meeting of the Society of the Round Table, a group dedicated to bringing back the social graces and customs of the early Middle Ages. They dressed in period costume, and Jan seemed more at home in the garb of an earlier time.

Twenty-five people were ready to swear he attended, but the hall they met in was only a few blocks from the park where Harker was killed. He could have slipped out long enough to make the round trip before he was missed. And he had been wearing a three-foot sword.

Susan Bohle claimed that she was visiting a boyfriend for the night. But, in a curious reversal of traditional morality, she refused to give his name, saying he wouldn't want to get involved. It was Susan who had called Professor Pyne, having

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herself been called by a friend and told of Harker's death.

So the identity of her boyfriend must be common knowledge on campus if someone had known to call her there. It could be obtained, if necessary. Of course, there was the possibility that she knew of the killing because she had participated in it, and no one had called her at all. In which case there probably was no boyfriend.

Professor Pyne, Stametti's fourth suspect, was at home all evening until he received the phone call from Susan Bohle. His wife would swear to that. But the testimony of wives in regard to their husbands is always suspect.

Lieutenant Loman stacked the reports together and weighed them in both hands. One of these four? Which one? If only the professor had been carrying a portable typewriter with him instead of a calculator. He could have just tapped out the name.

The name? Loman turned the reports over and stared at the headings, with the typed-in names and addresses. *Perhaps he did,* Loman thought. *Perhaps that's just what the professor did.*

A half hour later Stametti came into the office to find Loman leaning back in his chair folding a paper airplane. Several others were already distributed about the office.

"They're here," Stametti said, ignoring the aerodynamic experiments. "Which one do you want to see first?"

"I'll see them all," Loman told him. "Come on!"

"You've *got* it!" Stametti said, doing his best to keep up with Loman's long strides without breaking into a trot. "I can tell. You've pegged the killer."

"I have," Loman admitted, doing his best not to sound smug.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough to have obtained a warrant. The killer's rooms are being searched even as we stand here waiting for the elevator."

"Something I gave you?" Stametti demanded.

"Right—something you gave me. And something Professor Harker gave us."

"The number on the calculator?"

"Right."

"Then it means something?"

"It does—and it doesn't. Come along, the elevator's stalled again."

They went down the wide stairs in the old precinct building to the second floor, then down the long corridor, past the Juvenile Division, past Safe & Loft, to the large interrogation

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room Stametti had left the suspects in. "What do you mean, 'It does—and it doesn't'?" Stametti asked.

"We were looking at it wrong."

"Upside down?"

"No, backward. You'll see."

They entered the room. The four suspects were sitting around the conference table with a litter of plastic cups of coffee and cigarette butt-filled ashtrays in front of them.

Lieutenant Loman looked them over, sorting them out in his mind. Professor Pyne was furthest away, facing the door. The girl was, of course, Susan Bohle. She was very pretty, with long blond hair and piercing hazel eyes. Somehow Loman hadn't thought she'd be pretty. The slender young man with the aquiline nose who kept his left hand in front of his mouth must be Jan Bliss. The stocky man with the aggressive chin who kept his chair teetering precariously back would then be Robert Quipper.

"Good afternoon," Loman said. "I'm Lieutenant Loman. And you are"—he named them, left to right,—"Mr. Bliss, Miss Bohle, Professor Pyne, Mr. Quipper."

Three of them nodded. Quipper straightened his chair with a crash and leaned forward across the table. "Look here," he said. "What's all this about? Why are we here?"

"I apologise for the inconvenience," Loman said. "At least to three of you, I apologise. You see, some new information has come to light."

"New—ah—information?" Professor Pyne asked, frowning.

"Yes." Loman turned to Robert Quipper. "You told my investigator that you stayed home last night and waited for Professor Harker to call."

"That's right," Quipper said.

"The telephone company records show that you received that call," Loman said. He nodded to Stametti, who circled around to stand behind Quipper's chair.

"That's ridiculous," Quipper said, trying to keep an eye on Stametti and stare belligerently at Loman at the same time.

"How is it ridiculous?" Loman asked. "Because he called you from a pay phone? But there is a record of the call, and which pay phone it was from. It was the last call from that phone, and Professor Harker's prints are all over the handset."

"You have the right to remain silent," Stametti intoned, reading from the little card in his hand.

Quipper listened impassively as his rights were read to him.

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"I'm not saying anything," he said, when Stametti put the card back in his pocket.

"That's your right," Loman told him.

Quipper shook his head. "The goddam phone," he said.

"We have more," Loman said. "We have a witness that places you at the scene of the crime—that names you directly. I'm telling you this with the others present, so you won't think I'm playing some kind of cat-and-mouse game and taking each of you aside to accuse you of the murder. You killed James Harker, Mr. Quipper, and I know it."

"What witness?" Professor Pyne asked. "Who?"

"Not 'who,' Professor," Loman said, pulling the little calculator from his pocket. "This is my witness. Professor Harker did name his killer, and it was Robert Quipper he named."

"How?" Pyne asked.

"Why didn't he just write 808," Stametti asked.

"As Professor Pyne told us last night," Loman said, "Professor Harker didn't play games like that. Let's look at what he did. We found this number in the machine—2 1 9 8 . 2 1 1 3.

"Now there are three possibilities. One, that the number was there by some sort of cosmic accident, having nothing to do with the professor or his murder. I rejected that on the grounds that the professor wouldn't have left the calculator turned on if he wasn't using it. The battery would have died in a few hours. As a matter of fact, the full charge on the battery when we found the device shows that it wasn't turned on much before Professor Harker's death.

"Two, that Professor Harker put the number 2198.2113 in the calculator as a dying message, hoping it would tell us who killed him."

Professor Pyne leaned forward. "And you say it did? That number somehow implicates Quipper as Professor Harker's assassin?" He pulled out a pen and a notebook, wrote the number down, and stared at it.

A uniformed officer came in behind Lieutenant Loman and handed him a note. He read it, and then put it in his pocket and went on. "Not directly," he said. "For that we get to the third possibility—that Professor Harker actually put some other number down in the calculator, but that the number was somehow altered before we saw it.

"For example, as the professor fell he might have inadvertantly pressed one of the buttons, or it might have knocked against the pavement. A button that would alter the number the calculator was holding. Say

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the square button, or the square root button.

"Let's test that out. Now, if we square the number we're working with, we get"—he pressed the x^2 button on the calculator and read out, "4 8 3 2 1 3 2 . 9."

"Which brings nothing immediately to mind as the identity of the murderer. If we, on the other hand, press the square root function"—and Lieutenant Loman put the original number back in the machine and pushed the button marked $\sqrt{x}$, getting, 4 6 . 8 8 5 0 8 6.

Professor Pyne stared at the number, trying to read its mystical significance. "So?"

"So we were doing it backward. The professor *did* punch a number into his calculator. Then, as he fell, he hit the square root button.

"The number he punched in was Robert Quipper's phone number—4 8 3 2 1 3 3 ."

"But the number you get when you square our number is 4832132.9," Sergeant Stametti objected. "I admit it's uncomfortably close, but why the difference? How did the 3 change to a 2.9?"

"Try it," Loman invited, handing Stametti the calculator. "Put in the phone number first, then hit the square root button."

Sergeant Stametti did as instructed. He tapped Quipper's phone number into the machine, then took the square root. He stared down at the familiar number they had found on the machine.

"But when we reverse it," Loman said, leaning over the table and hitting the square button, "it ends in 2.9."

"Of course!" Professor Pyne said. "The calculator rounds off the last figure on numbers that exceed its capacity. This causes the error when the process is reversed."

"And we didn't look for a phone number," Lieutenant Loman said, "because the result had eight digits. But we were doing it backward."

"It'll never stand up in court," Quipper said.

Loman took the note he had just received from his pocket and flipped it in front of Quipper. "We got a warrant," he said, "and searched your apartment. Found an old hunting knife in a leather sheath. If that fresh stain on the blade is human blood, you're in trouble. Along with what we got from the phone company, I think we'll be able to put you away."

"You don't understand," Quipper said.

"*I* never do," Lieutenant Loman said. "Sergeant, take this gentleman downstairs."

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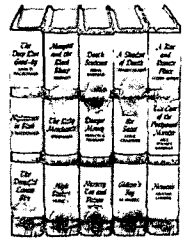

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